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from the editors

S E X has an unsettled and troubling status: it is variegated, ambivalent and wracked by contradiction. The complex intersection and historical conflation of S E X as *gender* and as *practice* is central to the problematic of its ontology. For S E X is as much about a process of representation as it is about the bodies it attempts to ground. In this sense, S E X is always a question. And the cinema is the most explicit and powerful cultural form through which this question of S E X, with its vast implications and deeply contested zones, has taken shape.

Observing sex offers more than a source of pleasure and/or anxiety, the activity has become the subject of much political and moral controversy. Underlying the contending forces of radicals, liberals and purists lie contrary beliefs and languages about the 'nature' of sex. But, whether sex is viewed as sacramental or subversive, liberating or threatening, we are all weighed down with expectation—sex has a constant hold on our thoughts.

With the feminist and gay movements of the late '60s, the question of sex became part of a larger revolutionary struggle. Sex was a political expression which needed to be liberated from its historical constraints; it was an activity to be re-discovered and re-written in 'free love.' Yet the results of these events are all too familiar. The vicissitudes of sexual politics changed as the utopian aspirations of the late '60s gave way to the disappointment—the painful discovery—of the late '70s and '80s: we did not re-write sex, it wrote us. History was not so easily discarded and under capitalism nothing is ever free.

This disappointment is manifest in the cinema's inexorable nostalgic turn of the '80s. A nostalgic turn which is either perversely nihilistic, as in *Blue Velvet*, or regressively infantile as evidenced in the latest strain of American teenage sex films. Here, the representation of sex is elided in favour of the 'before sex'; the promise of sex stands in for the 'real thing' which would seem to have lost its appeal.

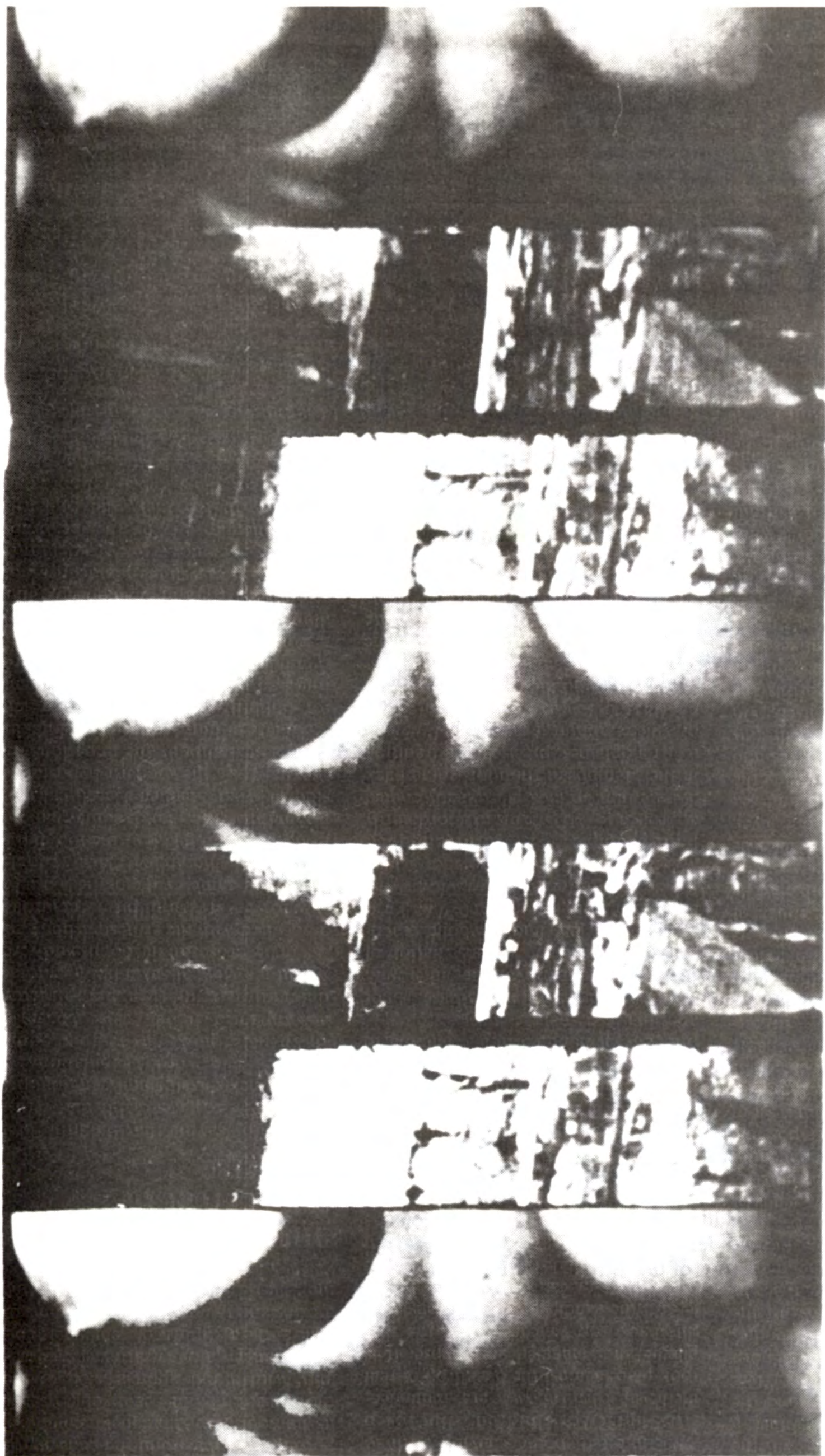
Still, all this is not surprising given the fact that sex is now a thing to be talked about 'openly.' The new discourse on sex is part and parcel of a larger pedagogical scheme—a sex education which, like Dr. Ruth's practical advice, belongs to that strain which regularizes and sanitizes sex. Sex is 'opened up,' its

questions given ready-made answers, only to ensure closure. (Sex is good clean fun, kids—so why do it?) Similarly, within the contemporary Canadian context, as evinced in a sampling of recent feature films, sex has become secondarized, an activity which is spoken and observed, rather than participated in. Sex in 'Adult' films such as *The Decline of the American Empire*, *A Winter Tan*, and *Family Viewing* is primarily represented through discourse—talking sex rather than doing it.

In spite of all this talking about sex or perhaps because of it, the representation of sex in the cinema has become a difficult and dangerous endeavour. To an unprecedented degree, the subject of sexual representation is the site of a battlefield where the stakes have been set out in advance and where no player is innocent. Out of this turbulent historical backdrop, this issue of *CineAction!* offers a wide spectrum of interpretations: from the manifesto-like claims for a post-modern sex, to a consideration of desire within the origin of the cinematic apparatus as it intersects with sexual representation, to a mapping of Bakhtinian possibilities for a theorization of sex, to decoding configurations of desire in specific films, to reports of failures to represent sex outside of outworn prescriptive economies, to, finally, a more utopian approach which presents ways of doing and shooting 'it' differently.

With the dreaded sex-related diseases of the '80s has come the new sobriety. This retreat from sexual change—a fear of sex—only feeds into the deepening conservatism of our time and it is potentially just as destructive as was the glorification of sexual excess in the '60s. For this reason we have attempted to re-insert the question back into sex, to re-think some old propositions and explore new ones. There has rarely been a time of consensus in the West on sex and the following considerations do not diverge from this tendency. The range of topics presented here does not in any way cover all of the possible modalities of sexual representation in the cinema. It does, however, offer a variety of different positions on sex which will hopefully open up new considerations of sex in the cinema.

**Kass Banning
Janine Marchessault**



Bruce Elder's **Illuminated Texts** (1982).

PANIC CINEMA:

Sex in the Age of the Hyperreal

by Arthur Kroker
& Michael Dorland

WHAT IS SEX in the age of the hyperreal? A little sign slide between kitsch and decay as the postmodern body is transformed into a rehearsal for the theatrics of sado-masochism in the simulacrum. Not sadism any longer under the old sign of Freudian psychoanalytics and certainly not masochism in the Sadean carceral, but sado-masochism now as a kitschy sign of the body doubled in an endless labyrinth of media images, just at the edge of ecstasy of catastrophe and the terror of the simulacrum.

1. PANIC SADISM. *Blue Velvet* is the postmodern world. Here, only the predators, like Frank, have energy and can make things happen. Everyone else is reduced to a passive parasite, whether like Dorothy Vallens who is parasited at the level of the pleasure of the pain of sado-masochism ("You put your disease inside me") or like Jeff, the detective who lives out the dream that is *Blue Velvet* in the specular, and distanced, position of the Kantian judge. The whole *fin-de-millennium* scene alternates between the hyper-kitschy and hyperchromatic colours of a 1950s advertising scene and violent excess. *Blue Velvet* is a perfect cinematic image for a postmodern culture where sex has now disappeared into a fourth order of simulation: Bataille's parodic vision of the pineal eye and the solar anus. Not the body as the sacred object of a power which inscribes, but now a whole media production of body parts for a contemporary cultural scene where indifference spreads. Consequently, hyperreal sex as detrital vision of panic penises, panic ovaries, and panic erotics.

2. PANIC PENISES. No longer the old male cock as the privileged sign of patriarchal power and certainly not the semiotician's dream of the decentered penis which has, anyway, already vanished into the ideology of the phallus,

but the *postmodern penis* which becomes an emblematic sign of sickness, disease and waste. Penis burnout, then, for the end of the world.

And just in time! Because in all of the technologies of sex which make possible a sex without secretions (the computerized phone sex of the Minitel system in Paris; video porn for the language of the gaze, designer bodies; and gene retreading), in all of these technologies of sex, the penis, both as protuberance and ideology, is already a spent force, a residual afterimage surplus to the requirements of telematic society.

Anyway, it was predictable. The male body has always been the privileged object and after-effect of a twofold psychoanalytical colonization: a *psychoanalytics of reception* which functions, as Lacan insists, by the principle of misrecognition where in the fateful mirror stage the bourgeois infant self substitutes the illusion of substantial unity to be provided by a fictive, abstract ego for concrete identity; and secondly, at the *social level*, where as theorized by Althusser, ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. This may be why, in the end, even Michel Foucault said with resignation that the postmodern self is really about sedimented subjectivity, that is, the constitution of the male self as an afterimage of the moral problematization of pleasure and the torturing procedures of the confessional.

Or maybe it is this and more. Not organic, natural sex any longer and not the discursive sexuality so praised by all the poststructuralists, but a cynical and parodic sex—a *schizoid and hyperreal sex*—for panic bodies. A schizoid sex, therefore, where sado-masochism of the hyperreal kind operates in the language of a liquid power which, no longer belonging as property to the old language of gender divisions (a male masochism? a female sadism?), operates at the more general level of torturer and victim.

When we have already passed beyond the first two orders of sex, beyond sex as nature and beyond sex as discourse, to sex as fascinating only when it is about

recklessness, discharge and upheaval—a *parodic sex*, then we have also broken beyond the analytics of sexuality and power to *excess*; beyond Foucault's language of the "care of the self" to *frenzy*; beyond the "use of pleasure" (Foucault again) with its moral problematization of the ethical subject in relation to its sexual conduct to a little sign-slide between *kitsch and decay*. Not then the nostalgia for an aesthetics of existence today or for a hermeneutics of desire (these are *passé* and who cares anyway?), but parodic sex as about the free expenditure of a "boundless refuse of activity" (Bataille) pushing human plans; not the coherency of the ethical subject (that has never motivated anyone except in the detrital terms of the subject as a ventilated remainder of death), but the excitation of the subject into a *toxic state*, into a sumptuary site of loss and orgiastic excess. Not, finally, a productive sex, but an *unproductive sex*, a sex without secretions, as the site of the death of seduction as that which makes sex bearable in the postmodern condition.

Bataille was right:

The (pineal) eye at the summit of the skull, opening on the incandescent sun in order to contemplate it in a sinister solitude, is not a product of the understanding, but is instead an immediate existence; it opens and blinds itself like a conflagration, or like a fever that eats the being; or more exactly the *head*. And thus it plays the role of a fire in the house; the head, instead of locking up life as money is locked in a safe, spends it without counting, for at the end of this erotic metamorphosis, the head has received the *electric power of points*. This great burning head is the image and the disagreeable light of the notion of expenditure . . .

(*Visions of Excess*, Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 82)

For expenditure is when "life is parodic and lacks an interpretation," that is, the excitation of the solar anus ("the solar annulus is the intact anus of her body at eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except



David Lynch's **Blue Velvet**: Sex in the postmodern world.

the sun, even though the anus is the night"). And why not? The pineal eye and the solar anus are also always about an excremental sexuality as the third order of simulation into which sex vanishes after the disappearance of organic and discursive sexuality, and after the fading away of the body itself as yet another afterimage of the postmodern scene.

3. PANIC OVARIES. And what then of women's wombs? Is natural reproduction preserved intact at the end of the world or have we already entered into a darker region of the terror of the simulacrum? Now, more than ever, women's bodies are the inscribed focus of a threefold deployment of relational power. In the postmodern condition, women's bodies are the prime afterimage of a strategy of body invasion which occurs in the inverted and excessive language of *contractual liberalism*.

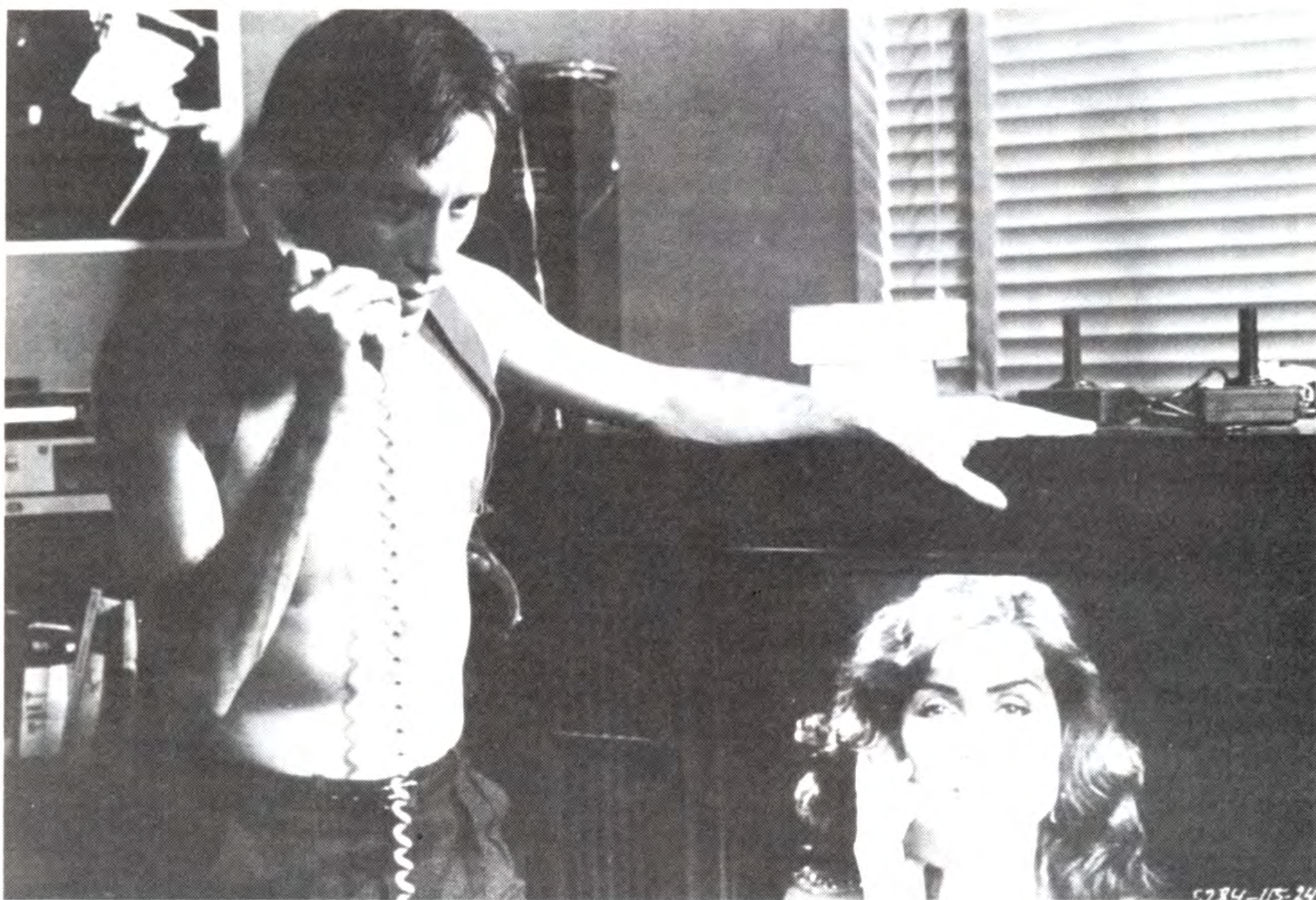
First, the *medical subordination* of women's bodies which results, whether through *in vitro* fertilization or genetic mixing, in the alienation of the womb. When the ovaries go outside (and with them the privileged language of sexual *différance*), it is also a certain sign of the

grisly technological abstraction of alienated labour into the alienation of reproduction itself.

Secondly, the medical inscription of women's bodies is superseded by the subordination of childbirth to the *ideology of law*. For example, in the Baby M case, the natural mother is reduced to the contractual fiction of a "hired womb"; the meaning of the "natural" is inverted into its opposite number (the *actual* mother becomes legally a "surrogate" and the Daddy surrogate—he was always only present as a free-floating seed in a genetic mixing tube—is *juridically* renamed as a real, living father); and, in the end, the entire juridical apparatus is directed towards justifying a new form of legal slavery for women who are poor, powerless, and thus potential victims of the predatory instincts of the ruling elites. A class of professional, middle-class elites, *men and women*, who measure the meaning of the "good" by the standards of petty convenience. Ironically, in the Baby M case, it was only after the natural mother lost custody rights to her baby that the media and the courts began, finally, describing her, not as the "surrogate mother" any longer, but as the *biological* mother. Cynical media and

cynical law for a rising class of cynical elites.

Thirdly, panic ovaries are also about all the cases of fetal appropriation where the state intervenes, supposedly on behalf of the rights of the unborn baby, to take *juridical* possession of the body of the mother. A perfect complicity, then, among the *technological* interventions of medicine into the body of the mother (the use of medical technology as an early warning system for detecting birth defects in the fetus); the *juridical* seizure of the fetus as a way of deploying state power against the body of the mother; and the *politics of the new right* which can be so enthusiastic about the jurisprudence of fetal appropriation as a way of investing the contractarian rights of the fetus against the desires of the mother. A whole hypocritical *fetus fetish* by law, by medicine, and by the neo-conservatives as a way of canceling out the will of the natural mother, and of taking possession of the bodies of women. Margaret Atwood's thesis in *The Handmaid's Tale* about the reduction of women to hired wombs is thus disclosed to be less an ominous vision of the future than a historical account of an already past event in the domination of women.



Meta-androgynous sex in David Cronenberg's **Videodrome** (1982).

4. PANIC PARASITES. So it is therefore appropriate, in a hyper-dependent cinema such as Canada's, that sex is portrayed as panic; either castration anxiety (*L'Ange et la femme*, 1977; *Opération beurre de pinotte*, 1985), voyeurism (*Porky's*, 1981; *Meatballs*, 1979) or domination (the long-standing rape motif in Canadian cinema from *Le Viol d'une jeune fille douce*, 1968; *Wedding in White*, 1972; to *Loyalties*, 1986). For the triply dominated (economically, culturally and administratively) Canadian cinema can only achieve expression through virulent extremes of understatement (absence) or overstatement (excess). To take as an example that most Canadian, because hyper-realistic, of filmmakers, David Cronenberg, he represents sex (or in fact any form of interaction) as *viral*, that is, as a meta-androgynous (or interspecies, including human and machines) parasitism, and this from the abdominal parasites of his first feature, *The Parasite Murders*, 1975; the vaginal armpit-penis of *Rabid*, 1976, to the (off-camera) super-fuck of Joy Bushell by Brundlefly in *The Fly*, 1986. Cronenberg's sexual (or affective) universe is one of relations of the absolute domination of parasitism-plus. In

Videodrome, 1982, cable TV producer Max Renn is aroused by the commercial possibilities of pirating a Pittsburgh-based signal diffusing sadomasochistic sex, until his own body becomes the pirated and vaginal site of *Videodrome* tapes. In a grim illustration of McLuhan's thesis (in *Understanding Media*) that we have become the sex organs of the machine, the new flesh of *Videodrome* is shed by Brundlefly in the horrific conclusion of *The Fly* to reveal the meta-human and genetic fusion of cable and insect in the technological nirvana of achieved parasite culture. Thus, of course, Cronenberg's *The Fly* is itself a parodic parasite (a remake) of the 1958 film, and this in turn refers back to the horror film as parasitic of literature, here Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and Mary Shelley's denunciation of (the modern) Prometheus whose classical archetype was itself a parasite for punitive vultures sent by the gods.

5. PANIC HEROISM. Seemingly at the opposite end from Cronenberg's hyper-realistic understatement, stands Bruce Elder who in such experimental epics as *Illuminated Texts* (1982) or *Lamentations: A Monument to the Dead World* (1985) offers against parasitism

by (the) world (-culture) the (cultural) parasitism of the world in a post-Heideggerian lament of heroic solipsism (hyper-realist overstatement). However, here too the sexual (affective) universe presented by Elder is one of sado-masochistic domination (the long voice-over on pornographic photography in *Illuminated Texts*; the diary passages of ecstatic descriptions of physical illness in both films). Yet if Elder sculpts a critique, an analytics and a therapeutics of the diseases of Western culture, this is possible on the condition of the revelation of the emptiness within (the images of Elder as 'a man with a movie camera' at the end of *Illuminated Texts*) mirrored in the windows of the Auschwitz barracks of a dead culture.

The slide, from Lynch's human predators to Cronenberg's parasites to Elder's absent depictions of the stench of corpses that cannot be smelled, fully states the panic of a contemporary cinema which has nothing left to show for itself but the surfaces (and special effects) of its own putrefaction.

6. PANIC CINEMA. Filmmakers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to see through it. □

IN SEARCH OF IT ALL



by Janine Marchessault

With these huge eyes half-closing in discretion and desire, with these blenching lips, all we see in their anguish is the dark design they imply, and in their avowal only the illusions they conceal.

HANS LUCAS¹

Fatima, Fatima
You know that I swore,
that one day I'd be,
your loving captor.

Fatima, Fatima
Your hips as they sway,
touch something in me,
the likes I can't say.

ANONYMOUS, 1894

THE DESIRE TO "CAPTURE" FATIMA ON FILM at a time when the cinema was still nothing more than an impressive gadget, raises the question of that erotic *essence* claimed by many to be fundamental to the cinema. For just a penny the little dark box could disclose the "wonders of the world": Niagara Falls and Fatima's exotic belly-dance. Though in the film Fatima danced fully costumed in heavy attire, white censor bars would soon appear over "those suggestive parts" of her gyrating body. This of course only added to her notoriety as well as to the popularity and financial success of other early peep shows of a less "modest" nature.

Films such as *The Kiss*, *How Bridget Served the Salad Undressed* and *Peeping Tom in the Dressing Room*, all produced just before the turn of the century, were teasingly suggestive of what their predominantly male audiences really wanted: TO SEE IT ALL.² And film, unlike the novel, unlike painting or even the photograph could promise *it* all, in all *its* contours and textures, in all *its* rhapsodic movements, in all *its* temporal splendour. Even the "live" show could not present so reassuring a vista, could not offer a place without danger, without fear of being 'recognized' or worse still, included. And later these spectators, bodies cloaked securely in the cool darkness of a large room, could sit tight as a cone-shaped light directed their eyes toward a large screen—in search of "it" (all).

— I —

IN HIS ESSAY "EROTICISM IN THE CINEMA" Andre Bazin directs our attention to the integral unity of eroticism and censorship. Just as the transgression needs the taboo to define it (Bataille), censorship—of a certain kind—plays an inextricable role in determining and completing the erotic gesture. The workings of eroticism and the play of desire in the cinema are, for Bazin, rooted in the tension between "what we deeply desire to see on the screen" and "what could never be shown."³ The erotic image *par excellence* of Marilyn Monroe is not the calendar pin-up of her naked body but that innocent gust of wind in *The Seven Year Itch*: "Inventiveness such as this," writes Bazin, "presupposes an extraordinary refinement of the imagination, acquired in the struggle against the rigorous stupidity of a puritanical

code."⁴ By continually alluding through concealment to that certain "something," the concealment itself comes to stand as signifier for the "real thing"; the concealment itself becomes erotic.

But this is the register of desire that plays right into the laws of capital exchange and for this reason Bazin is careful not to misrepresent the over-determined nature of these relations: the essential characteristics of the apparatus cannot be divorced from the socio-economic context out of which they arise nor is eroticism in the cinema simply an accidental commodity. Eroticism sells but in the cinema more than in any other art form, eroticism would seem to be an integral principle: "It is of the cinema alone that can we say that eroticism is there on purpose and is a basic ingredient."⁵

While Bazin remains cautiously ambiguous as to why and how this is accomplished, he suggests that the answer lies not with the censors (who are "too arbitrary and stupid to be able to channel the imagination suitably") but with the censorship "imposed by the image itself."⁶ It is of course with this emphasis—"the cinema can say everything, but [by] not show[ing] everything"⁷—that the idealist foundations of Bazin's eloquent contributions make their appearance.

The cinema can create the *impression* of everything by not representing everything: the screen is a "mask" which hides part of a scene and prior to that, the frame of the image cuts and parses out each moment of the *real*. It is precisely through the limits of its access that the image can reference a "hidden" outside, an off-screen space in which the imaginary unity of the cinema will take its shape.

One need only recall the famous chase scenes which ended most of D.W. Griffith's films—the parallel montage mirroring the final narrative climax in the coming together of two separate spaces. One need only remember *Intolerance* (1916), revered by the Russians for its intellectual montage, which essentially failed to "satisfy" its American audiences because the fusion of disparate historical fragments could not be reconciled to a whole. (Because more than two different contexts creates too much asymmetry, too much discontinuity, and desire loses its footing.)

Griffith's 'innovations' were premised upon the simple principle that the sensation of filmic continuity is created paradoxically in its negation. The signifying practice so essential to classical narrative cinema is constituted through what Kaja Silverman has called a "castrating coherence":

[Only] with the disruption of imaginary plenitude, does the shot become a signifier, speaking first and foremost of that thing about which the Lacanian signifier never stops speaking: castration. A complex signifying chain is introduced in place of the lack which can never be made good, suturing over the wound of castration with narrative. *However, it is only by inflicting the wound to begin with that the viewing subject can be made to want the restorative of meaning and narrative.*⁸

The desire to see beyond the frame, to fill in the gaps, works to "suture" the spectator into the fictive reality unfolding on the screen. The operation of this signifying system, which necessarily places the spectator at the centre of it all, paradigmatically reproduces the quattrocento of painting in its construction of a "princely perspective"—that position of mastery where you can forget your self.

By carefully discerning between external and internal censorship, between social institutional censorship and the censorship imposed by the cinema's machinery, Bazin fails to

note their mutual dependence. At any rate it is clear that without one, the other would lose much of its impetus. Fatima's threat is perceived as real and must therefore be covered over. Her exotic dance is doubly eroticised when her body is partially barred and so, it is in their very absence that those "suggestive" parts become most present. Just as the censorship imposed by the image, its masking, is exactly what makes it seem transparent, the bar which attempts to cover over difference, Fatima's sexuality, is what marks it out.

The erogenic scenario then, is always a mystery premised not upon *what* we most desire to see but upon the specular desire itself. Through an "extraordinary refinement of the imagination," this desire makes its appearance in the form of various props (the delicate movement of a woman's skirt) which, given the nature of desire, are the opposite of seeing, which indicate precisely the "what could never be shown." This is the circular logic which, according to Freud and Lacan after him, relays the play of fetishism.

Hidden from our vision but present in our imaginary, hidden but present, the construction of an off-screen space is the cinema's "dialectical constituent." That "basic ingredient" is none other than the old familiar play of presence and absence. And it is here, in the seemingly seamless fusion, in the unifying body of the cinema, in the blinding impression of the image that the desire to see "it all" is frustrated and replenished. It is *here*, in the space between, that the cinema's phenomenology unfolds.

— II —

CHRISTIAN METZ MAINTAINS THAT THE cinema, that *imaginary signifier*, is analogous to the striptease. The premise driving Griffith's cinema then: those "wandering framings (wandering like the look, like the caress)" which bar the look in a kind of *delicious terror*, the site of a "permanent undressing"⁹—the promise of sustained desire.

This is the difference between eroticism in the cinema and the live show. The live show has to deliver *it*, wears itself out; the cinema can make allusions: something is here concealed beneath the white sheet of the screen. Thus, according to Metz, the cinema is articulated through a "double withdrawal" because the object, not only at distance as in the theatre, is altogether absent: "What distinguishes the cinema is an extra reduplication, a supplementary and specific turn of the screw bolting desire to the lack."¹⁰

Nonetheless, like the sheet raised over the body of the dead or like the one that shields lovers from the outside world, the screen promises some *ultimate* fusion, playing out the limits of expenditure by disavowing its own. The cinema, then, with its reproductions more real than life, carries out the undertaker's sacred fetish: the masking of death. This screw, *bolting desire to death*, twists the sensual experience of the specular, which Metz posits is so much like the experience of the primal scene, into a kind of necrophilic perversion.

Moreover, this "perversion"—the relation between desire and death that would seem to be basic to the apparatus—can be detected in the codes used to signify "sex" and "death" in classical cinema. Bazin was correct in observing that the Hays Code instigated the development of a highly elaborate system of metaphors, necessitating the refinement of the cinematic imagination.¹¹ But more than this, *the imagination*, in its laborious elaboration of a signifying system, did not simply "invent" but, rather, was prefaced by the unconscious associations of its culture. Hence, the train moving into the tunnel (the site of so many murders and so much love), the fade to black, the strange meditations on nature, the empha-

sis on timelessness all point towards a beyond, towards the ineffable spasms of passion and death.

Following the commonplace notion in Western literature, Bataille points out that sex and death—the antipodes of pleasure—are profoundly contiguous.¹² For both the sexual act and death satisfy a primal desire for a 'lost continuity.' This is the continuity of all existence outside, beyond and prior to "life," a lost origin. The aim of eroticism is seen by Bataille to be the opposite of reproduction which emphasizes the inherent fragmentation of all life. Eroticism is a desire for complete fusion, the dissolution of all barriers, the loss of self.

But, and this is crucial for Bataille, eroticism is the experience not of death but of the limits of death, the limits of reproduction: "What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity, all the continuity such a world can sustain."¹³ In order for Eroticism to be experienced—fleetingly as a kind of living paradox, of death in life—reproduction must be (can only be) temporarily forgotten. And so the erotic movement down the path towards death is never completed, never satisfied, always left hanging, censored by the fact of reproduction. Eroticism is the articulation of a yearning, it is a "tormenting desire": *it is nostalgia*.

Bataille's views are undoubtedly shaped by Freud's writings and specifically by his hypothesis that all instincts are directed towards "the restoration of an earlier state of things."¹⁴ An earlier condition which cannot be recognized because of primary repression (*Urverdrängung*), an earlier condition which hypothetically signals a return to an origin but an origin which remains always beyond its grasp. The desire for this primal object is alienated and insatiable:

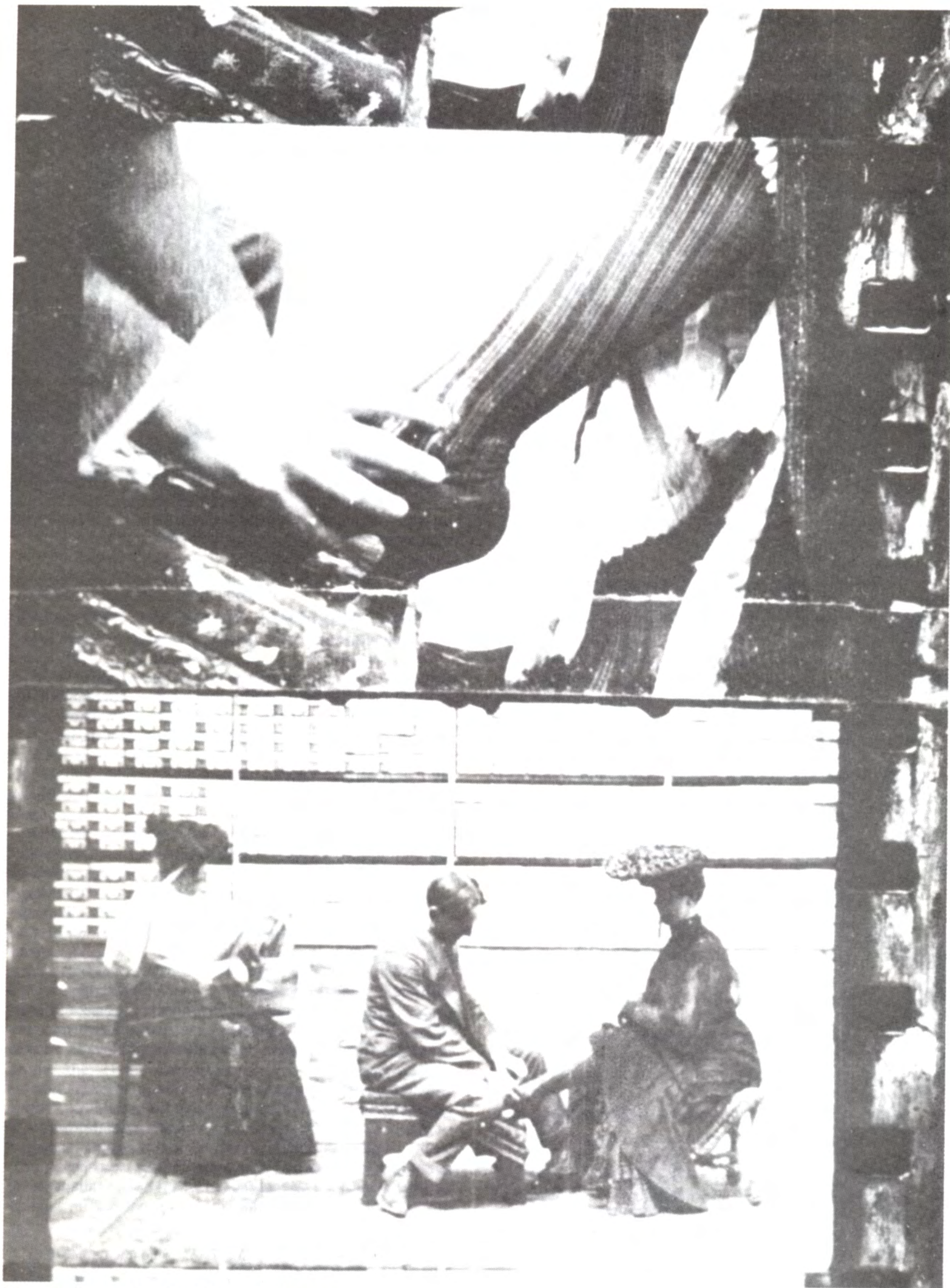
... all substitution—or reaction formations and sublimations avail nothing towards relaxing the continual tension; and out of the excess of the satisfaction demanded over that found is born the driving momentum which allows no abiding in any situation presented to it, but in the poet's words "urges ever forward, ever unsubdued."¹⁵

Thus, the object of desire is always one which was previously lost, *its finding always a re-finding*¹⁶: a home-coming. But a return which is always disappointing because the temporal scheme has rearranged things; childhood memories cannot find their grounding because the house is smaller than previously imagined. The lost object is displaced, substituted by another term which is *just not the same*.¹⁷

Eroticism as defined by an impossible desire to recapture something forever lost, as a desire for unity fettered by the truth of reproduction. Eroticism then, as the disavowal of an absent unity, a disavowal which nominates and structures the terms of/as lack. Eroticism then which needs its censorship and its death—its sacrifices—in order to conceal and construct the fiction of origin. Eroticism then, as the cinema's deepest incarnation—the nostalgic face of truth: a close-up on those huge eyes half-closing, half-way to death.

In their own fashion Bataille and Freud attempt to describe an apparatus of desire by way of a universal hankering: the primordial wish for origin. In their different ways they construct a phenomenology of desire. That these descriptions, directed towards an understanding of consciousness, seem so well suited to describing the cinema, that they overlap with Bazin's own brand of phenomenology, is in keeping with Jean Baudry's theorizations of the apparatus.

For Baudry, the invention of the cinema, so close to the (always erotic) dream state which, according to Freud, best approximates the "return," is the answer to that primordial wish. The cinema can be read as an attempt to "recollect"—is an approximation of—that form of *lost satisfaction* which



Edwin S. Porter: **The Gay Shoe Clerk** (1903).

phenomenology describes and which psychoanalysis sets out to unravel. The inventor's unconscious desire, Baudry tells us, is inscribed in the very machinery of the cinema: "... without his always suspecting it, the subject is ... led to produce mechanisms mimicking, simulating the apparatus which is no other than himself."¹⁹

There are two positions which can lead from this argument. The first would affirm Baudry's conceptualizations, seeing the body of cinema as a simulacrum of that primordial body which is none other than the dark moist enclosure of the maternal womb. And from this position: so it is that the image of woman, that masquerade of depth, best potentiates this primordial enclave—and so it is that her image permeates the cinema and its love stories. The desire for fusion—either primordial or the result of alienated relations under capitalism—all part and parcel of collective experience, of a collective unconscious.

The second position would raise the question of sexual difference, of feminine desire in relation to the inventor's gender. It would see in the apparatus of the cinema a series of phallogocentric affects, the oppressive binarisms of masculine desire, the terms of castration played out.

Both positions present problems. On the one hand, reducing the apparatus to a desire for a "primordial archaic femininity" as Jacqueline Rose has put it,¹⁹ excludes the potential for a radical and political expression of difference, for a different articulation of the cinema. The cinema is explained away. On the other hand the second position, by historicizing that desire through concepts of sexual difference, runs the risk of extending and affirming the very phallic premises, the same Hegelian postures that it would seek to expose.

Such, for example, is the case with the *Imaginary Signifier*. In order to invert the image of idealism and to uncover the multiple determinations which make up the apparatus as a social technology, Metz undertakes a psychoanalytic interpretation of the cinema. But as Teresa De Lauretis and others have demonstrated, his reading continues to pose woman as "telos and origin of phallic desire":

Concepts such as voyeurism, fetishism, or the imaginary signifier, however appropriate they may seem to describe the operations of dominant cinema, however convergent—precisely because convergent?—with its historical development as an apparatus of social reproduction, are directly implicated in a discourse which circumscribes woman in the sexual, binds her (in) sexuality, makes her the absolute representation, the phallic scenario.²⁰

The cinema as the striptease of death, as the quintessential embodiment and propagator of the binary regime necessarily signals the end of *radical(ly)* alternative practices. If such totalizing statements are to be taken at their word, women, whose relation to the cinematic apparatus can only ever be a masochistic one, must choose not to make cinema but something else. Not that it isn't time for women to reinvent the technology of the cinema, but here again 'reinvention' is a sticky proposition for, if we are to take psychoanalysis at its word, patriarchy has no outside. Thus, we are left to despair, resolving ourselves to the current apocalyptic cries of so much cultural theory which proclaims the end of the subject, the end of history, the end of politics.

The challenge for women, as De Lauretis has insisted, must be to construct films and theoretical discourses which re-work the terms of change, of its possibilities. Such a re-working would have to redefine the traditional matrices of the subject, of its history and culture without doing away with the struggle for meaning. This would also entail finding a way to write about the cinema without affirming *woman as*



Edison's **Kissing**.

image, as absence, as lack—without evoking "Fatima" as analogy.²¹

— III —

THE CHALLENGE TO CREATE NEW MEANINGS, to re-interpret desire is a precarious one, a challenge riddled with contradictions. These difficulties became most evident when recently I set out to review a series of commercially distributed pornographic videos made for women by women. At the outset I believed that these might present some kind of radical restructuring of desire, some new alternative to eroticism and its systems of suture and sacrifice. Pornography for women (a contradiction in terms?) as reproduction unveiled, pornography as Stephen Heath remarked it "at the end of cinema."²²

Directed primarily at heterosexual women, these videos came cluttered with the same clichés and ho-hum scenarios of domination and desire that have been the hidden trademark of the apparatus since its inception. Now more clearly articulated because more "natural," the homosexual (phallic) subtext, which was always the driving force behind pornography, is finally unleashed. This, of course, is the large penis (the real libidinal impetus behind those cutesy lesbian scenes) with the standard close-ups of the vagina providing its resting place. The superficial positing of woman as subject of desire, relayed through the standard economies of realism, continues to affirm the same old story—she still has no hand in things.

What is interesting about these videos, which is what is interesting about pornographic films in general, is that in order to *channel the imagination suitably* the impression of reality must be maintained and yet, in this context realism is completely undermined. Once the body is exposed, there is no imagination left to channel—marked by the exhaustion of "that basic ingredient," the cinema is reduced to a paltry aphrodisiac. As Heath notes:

The pornographic film, in fact, is that fundamental moment of discovery of the absence of the body in film, of a sole order of representation, the limit of the phallus, cinema come to



Streets of Paris: Sally Rand's fan dance.

that—where its narratives, its strategies, its voices, its complications of the shown had, while it held that order, to that limit, engaged other possibilities . . .²¹

Pornography *at the end of cinema*—but also close to the beginnings of cinema where what was important was not the story but the thrill of seeing. According to the latest statistics, however, the thrill is waning and the market for pornographic films is shrinking away. Pornography for women is probably the last sad attempt to revitalize a listless emporium. Nonetheless, the idea of women engaging in the production of their own pornography, in the production of different forms of eroticism, carries an important potential. For pornography as the limit of cinema might be turned around, might turn things around—might channel that imagination in a different direction.

It is in this context that one would want to examine Stan Brakhage's autopsy film *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1973). By all accounts the film is pornographic, it suggests that obscene uncovering at the end of cinema—what else could be at the end of cinema but the morgue? *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (autos/opsis: autopsy) is indeed a seeing which collapses the dialectic of the cinema's structured blindness by looking upon the face of death, the tearing open of its body as the site of an impossible looking: *because absence has no body and death no face*. At first it would seem that it is the anguish of this impossible looking, a desire for origin, that is motivating the dizzying movements of the camera, de-centering the look by stopping at nothing. At first it would seem that we are back at Bazin with the act of seeing as a painful splintering, with the *body in bits and pieces* as reference to some "orthopedic totality."²⁵ At first it would seem, in the overbearing silence at the limits of cinema, that nostalgia has found its bearings—its ultimate narration. But it is just at this summit, with the collapse of an epistemology grounded in representation, that Brakhage begins to rewrite the language of eroticism.

Within a phallogocentric economy, eroticism arises out of the pornographic moment—that "X" rated moment, the mark of a mystery. Eroticism speaks in relation to this "X" and

becomes, in this sense, the censoring "X". *The Act of Seeing* dissects the innermost recesses of "X", the inner workings of eroticism, by beginning at the end (of a particular history) with the pornographic, with the autopsy: the body/cinema "come to that." But in Brakhage's film "that" is where pornography and eroticism (as we know them) no longer make sense, where the binary system which defines their relation falls in on itself.

A difficult seeing is set up both at the level of content—choosing images which are difficult to watch *precisely* because they are over-determined—and at the level of stylistic presentation—the constant coiling of the camera does not allow for one coherent vision. Brakhage, as Heath writes, "show[s] what could not be watched at once in the shown [dead bodies] . . . and in the showing (the absence of any position of the look, the camera disjoined—in framing, height, movement . . .)."²⁶ The desire to see for yourself is staged in relation to that old *perceptual cogito*, deconstructing a certain body; its presentation; its mastering through a science which depends on the autopsy; its epistemology which insists on a certain clarity of vision, precisely on its ability to erase its discursive foundations. As anonymous faces are peeled away from skulls and masses of muscle tissue hang off shattered limbs, the intricate and yet seemingly random kinesis of the hand-held camera becomes increasingly noticeable, overriding the moribund images. Moving in and out of focus, from darkness into light, the camera steers over and across objects which cannot be identified. They are too magnified for classification proper. The crisis instigated by the progressive difficulty in seeing is integral to the movement of the film, to its foregrounding of a particular history of desire which needs markers and rulers—which needs mystery without uncertainty.

The Act of Seeing is a difficult film to watch, difficult until the "X" no longer matters, until the desire to see (with) your own eyes is transformed. Here, shredded bodies no longer pose for penetration—they exist for the movement of light. And in the vibrant secretions of reds and blues lies death—not transcended but exposed. The cinema not as death nor as life, nor as some inverse ideal of pure formal subjectivity but as *something else*, something which exposes the gaps between those constricting terms, something of a document which historicises the "delicious terror" of absence—something which rethinks the cinema's possibilities.

It can never be a question of "returning," nor of starting again at zero but perhaps, rather, of starting where the historical conditioning of our desires and of their imaging systems is most explicit. It is here that the contradiction of cinema, of patriarchy and the conditions of its wishes which inevitably play a role in constructing our own forms of wishful thinking, might be worked over. It is here—with the fact that the "just before" of fetishism and its myriad veils, though worn thin, still exert their considerable power; with the fact that I cannot show you a non-patriarchal image without first showing you what it isn't—it is here, right smack in the middle of the mess, that a different constitution of the cinema might be specified.

If the goal of an alternative model of desire is to introduce an "a" into that "old dream of symmetry" (Irigaray), then this a/symmetry must come from somewhere. A-, from the start contradictory, is at once the expression of unity and the naming of its opposite. It is perhaps by working through contradiction without resolving it, without resolving ourselves to it, that we may begin again at "A". . . □

ENDNOTES

1. *Godard on Godard*, ed. and trans. by Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1972), p. 28.
2. cf. Arthur Lennig, "A History of Censorship of the American Film," in Thomas R. Atkins ed. *Sexuality in the Movies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), pp. 36-75.
3. Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* vol. II (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 171.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
8. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 204. (Italics mine.)
9. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 77.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
11. Bazin, op. cit., pp. 171-172.
12. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality*, trans. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 11-41.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
14. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 37-38. Bataille's conception of eroticism is not dissimilar to the myth of the androgyne proposed by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* which Freud refers to in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The fiction references the lost unity of beings reinstated through sexual union, and the return to an earlier state of "oneness."
15. *Ibid.*
16. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, S.E., VII, p. 222. As Jean Laplanche explains: "The object rediscovered is not the lost object but a substitute by displacement; the lost object is the object of self-preservation, of hunger, and the object one seeks to refind in sexuality is an object displaced in relation to that first object. From this of course, arises the impossibility of ultimately ever rediscovering the object, since the object which has been lost is not the same as that which is to be rediscovered." In: *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 20.
17. Luis Bunuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) is the exemplary metaphorical enactment of this instance. Here, that "obscure object" is woman played by two different actresses and her voice dubbed by a third. There is no originary instance, no impersonator, simply a confusion which is never acknowledged by the subject of desire who is forever unsatisfied, who is continually denied the one thing he wants most: intercourse with Conchita—the woman who, unbeknownst to him, does not exist.
18. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," trans. in *Apparatus* (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), p. 61.
19. Jacqueline Rose, "The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 183.
20. For an interesting discussion of these problems see Jacqueline Rose, op. cit. pp. 172-186, and Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 12-36.
21. Jacqueline Rose sums up the problem: "... returning to the concept of disavowal, [in order] to redefine that concept as the question of sexual difference is necessarily to recognize its phallic reference, how woman is structured as image around this reference and how she thereby comes to represent the potential loss and difference which underpins the whole system..." (Op. cit., p. 182).
22. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 185.
23. *Ibid.*
24. For an elaboration on the psychoanalytic notion of "the body in bits and pieces" see Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 79-90. *The body in bits and pieces* has been described as that polymorphous, autoerotic state which precedes the constitution of ego (i.e. the mirror stage). The problem inherent in this formulation is an epistemological contradiction for "the body in bits and pieces" can only be formulated retroactively in the mirror stage, as Gallop points out: "... unity is not first but follows from the vision of the body in bits and pieces." (p. 80)
25. Heath, op. cit., p. 154.

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BAKHTIN, EROTICISM AND THE CINEMA:

Strategies for the Critique and Trans-Valuation of Pornography

by Robert Stam

MY PROJECT IN THIS ESSAY might be seen as doubly suspect. I propose to explore the relevance of the conceptual categories of the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to the theory and practice of cinematic eroticism, yet the fact is that Bakhtin rarely spoke of eroticism per se and never, to my knowledge, spoke of the cinema. But perhaps this very "illegitimacy" prolongs the spirit and method of Bakhtin, for whom all texts, including his own, were susceptible to surprising "homecomings," ever open to reworking by a boundless context. I would like here to imagine cinematic eroticism *through* Bakhtin, to envision the ways in which his thought might contribute to the partial reframing of a debate which too often lapses into the formulaic repetition of Manichean binarism: bad porn versus good erotica; bad censorship versus good freedom; bad repression versus good hedonism. How can Bakhtin's categories be enlisted in a non-moralistic critique of pornography, one that does not invoke retrograde notions of "good taste" and "seemly behaviour?" What is the relevance of Bakhtin's vision of the body for erotic representations? What are the implications of his notions of "carnival" and the "carnavalesque"? How might Bakhtin and Voloshinov's "trans-linguistics" contribute to a semiotics of sexuality and sexual representation? I will touch briefly on a number of texts and filmmakers, but the emphasis throughout will be on viable *strategies* of critique and trans-valuation. Some of these strategies include: meta-pornographic reflexivity; the grotesque body; the culture of laughter; transgressive writing; parodic carnivalization; performer/spectator dialogism; and the translinguistic analysis of sexual communication.

One possible approach to our subject would be to retrospectively enlist Bakhtin in the defense of commercial pornography as presently constituted. Pornography, such a position might argue,

constitutes a contemporary version of Bakhtin's "carnival"; it overturns puritanical taboos, fostering what Bakhtin calls carnival's "free and familiar contact" and "intermingling of bodies." The close-up attention to male and female genitals, in this perspective, renders carnival's predilection for the "lower bodily stratum." Zoom-ins to spread-eagled actresses pay homage to the "protuberances and orifices" of the body, and the privileging of male ejaculation, multiplied to surreal dissemination via optical tricks in films such as *Behind the Green Door*, provides a modern-day equivalent to seasonal rituals of fecundity.

The problem with such an analysis, of course, is that it doesn't convince even for a second. A Bakhtinian defense of pornography would be truly grotesque, and not in Bakhtin's positive sense of that word. While porn does level its characters to their sexual common denominator, this levelling is in no way equivalent to a carnivalesque overturning. Commercial porn seems more premised on puritanical taboos than antithetical to them; it has a vested interest in the prohibitions it purports to fight. Porn's "celebration" of the body usually amounts to little more than the dreary *mise-en-scène* of male partialism: i.e. the anxious foregrounding of fragmented body parts manifesting sexual difference. The veneration of the ejaculating penis, often centre-frame and giganticized by wide-angle lenses, rather than an homage to fecundity, is a salute to the phallus, the phallus which "stands in," so to speak, as a synecdoche for the absent male spectator. While Bakhtin's carnival is *inclusive*—the party to which everyone is invited—porn is *exclusive*, its delights, as Alain Finkelraut and Pascal Bruckner point out, being three times limited—to the eye, to the genital organs, and to men.¹ Even porn's temporalities and rhythms are distinctly male. In narrative and aesthetic terms, porn orchestrates what Nabokov calls "the copulation of clichés" aimed at stimulating a "tepid lust." Commercial porn, in sum, consti-

tutes not carnival's banquet but rather the junk food of the erotic imagination.

At the same time, we cannot regard porn as uniformly retrograde, nor would we want to throw out the baby of shared eroticism with the bathwater of machismo. The problem with porn is not that it turns people on—stimulating desire is as worthy an artistic goal as stimulating social anger or aesthetic admiration—but that it only turns *some* people on, and that it only turns them on in *some* ways, and for *some* reasons, and that it hurts as many as it arouses. In Bakhtinian terms, porn is "monologic"; it subordinates everything to the dictates of the masculine imagination. Porn has not been open, generally, to what Bakhtin would call the "heteroglossia" (literally, "many-languagedness") of erotic life. Even when porn purports to be "dialogic" by incorporating the sexual practices of the "other"—for example by offering lesbian scenes—it is generally only a case of monologism masquerading as dialogism, since lesbian scenes are almost invariably staged in view of the imperious needs of the straight male spectator, under his watchful eye. ("No possibility of sexual staging escapes him," writes Luce Irigaray. "So long as he is the organizer, anything goes."²)

We should not be essentialist, however, about the porn experience. In fact, there is no single audience but rather different communities which approach porn from what Bakhtin would call "diverse dialogical angles." Tom Waugh and others have spoken eloquently of the positive centrality of porn within the cultural life of the gay male subculture, its assuaging of solitudes in asserting: "You are not alone. Others do what you fantasize." There is no unitary spectator then, but a multitude of spectatorial positions. Any sexual representation gains its "intonation" and "social accent," to use Bakhtin's terminology, only within the larger dialogue with the spectator, with other texts, and with the ambient social and political context. Porn seen in a movie theatre full of businessmen on their way

to the local bordellos is not the same as porn shared by a couple or a group of friends. Nor would we want to equate porn with "sexually explicit material," an equation which would leave no place for the lesbian and gay sensibilities of Constance Beeson's *Holding* or Jean Genet's *Chant d'Amour*, or for the "feminist pornography" of Godard/Mieville's *Numero Deux*.

META-PORNOGRAPHIC REFLEXIVITY

There are ways, I would suggest, to recuperate sexual imagery in the cinema without falling into the mindless sexism of commercial porn. One of those ways is the kind of "meta-pornography" practiced by Jean-Luc Godard. Since the early '60s, Godard has conducted what Bakhtin would call a "submerged polemic" with pornography, a kind of metatextual dialogue with porn as a pre-existing body of texts. Time and again Godard returns to the scene of pornography, to the sexual fascination of its images and the frustration implicit in its lure. We find a paradigmatic instance in the famous "cinematographe" sequence of *Les Carabiniers* where the obtuse soldier Michelangelo confounds the screen image of a naked woman with flesh-and-blood reality. (The film in question is "Le Bain de la Femme du Monde," modelled on an 1895 film entitled "Le Bain.") The sequence cites three short films, each a mock prototype of some of the earliest film genres—documentary, slapstick, pornography—but it is the porn film, significantly, which triggers the strongest reality-effect in Michelangelo. When the actress moves off-screen, he tries to pursue her outside the frame. When she enters the bathtub, he tries to peek over the side. He succeeds, ultimately, only in pulling down the screen. He discovers, in short, the disappointment implicit in pornography's erotic promise; the fact that all it offers is the sterile plenitude of a simulacrum.

Godard approaches the subject of porn's built-in trajectory of disenchantment once again in *Tout Va Bien*, this time in reference to a static image. We see Susan/Jane Fonda showing Jacques/Yves Montand a photograph of a penis being fondled by a woman's hand. The image fills the screen for what seems an unnaturally long time, as Susan's off-screen voice comments: "Admit that this image satisfies you less than it did three years ago." On one level, she is referring to the declining satisfactions of their own relationship, but on another she refers to the law of

diminishing returns in the exploitation of sexual imagery in the cinema. Pornography perpetually cheats its public of the utopia it perpetually promises. It manufactures its own satiation as each new mystery is soon exhausted. The *pornographe* becomes apathetic and virtually unexcitable. The cinematic images become, as Sartre says of photographs in *La Nausee*, like aphrodisiacs that have lost their potency. In still another sense, Susan's comment might also be addressed to the exaggerated hopes of the erotic visionaries who saw the mere portrayal of sexual coupling as "wonderfully dangerous" in its "heavenly power."³ The routinization of such images appears to have deprived them of their power of scandal and utopia. They can regain that power, I would suggest, only *in relation* to alternative structures of feeling, alternative models of cinema and human relating.

Despite the relative sexual audacity of many of his films, Godard's work generally demonstrates a *pudeur* which derives not from a puritanical distrust of sexuality but rather from a sensitivity to the generally exploitative nature of such images within dominant cinema. Godard constantly short-circuits the incipient eroticism of potentially pornographic imagery in such a way as to make the spectator conscious of his or her investment in voyeurism. This subversion of a certain kind of pleasure, however, can itself be intensely pleasurable. A kind of aesthetic jubilation transports us from the privatized space of individual fantasy to a broader social space in which we see our own desires as strangely comic. (Self-directed laughter is still laughter.) In the porn-film sequence of *Masculin, Feminin* for example, Godard illuminates the nature of pornography and the spectator's relation to it. The cited film—said to parody Bergman's *The Silence* because it is Swedish and involves impersonal sexual encounters in an unidentified land—is prefaced by an ironic intertitle in ersatz Scandinavian: "4X Ein Sensitiv und Rapid Film." The reflexive self-characterization involves superimposed puns and ironies, the "4X" referring simultaneously to 4X film stock, X as in X-rated, and X as in the 4-Star system of journalistic evaluation, and the "sensitive" and "rapid" referring both to the sensibility and quick pace of the film and to the light-sensitivity of the film-stock. The film-within-the-film mirrors *Masculin, Feminin* as a whole; both concern relations between the sexes, although the porn film offers a particularly reductionist version in which communication is limited to the para-

linguistics of grunts and the proxemics of lust, the absurdity of which is heightened by a distorting mirror which turns the male figure, especially, into a kind of monster. Paul and Madeleine, while aware of the film's gross stupidity, are unable to leave, thus demonstrating the manner in which exploitative films enlist spectators as the passive accomplices of their seductive aggressions: "We control our thoughts," says Paul's interior monologue, "but not our emotions, which are everything." Paul's poetic commentary speaks of the role of the desiring spectator within the apparatus, of the emotional demands we make of films: "Marilyn Monroe had aged terribly. It made us sad. It wasn't the film we dreamed of . . . the total film we carried within ourselves . . . that we wanted to make . . . or more secretly . . . that we wanted to live." Paul's off-screen words coincide with the close-up image of the woman in the porn film. Her face moves down-screen, presumably in the direction of the man's penis. The implied off-screen fellatio, as an act of unilateral homage to the phallus, metaphorizes the porn film's flattering relation to the male spectator; he remains passive while being serviced by a competent sexual technician in a non-reciprocated *onanisme a deux*. The juxtaposition of Paul's lament with the pornographic images, meanwhile, suggests a kind of proportion: a quick blow-job between strangers is to our dreams of real love as pornography is to true cinema.

PORNOGRAPHY AS ERSATZ CARNIVAL

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin described the late-Medieval carnival as a utopian festival in which laughter enjoyed a symbolic victory over death, oppression and paranoia, as an alternative "second life" in which the people won brief entry into a sphere of freedom. It is useful to regard porn, I think, as a kind of "ersatz" or "degraded" carnival. Ersatz carnivals capitalize on the frustrated desire for carnival by serving up partial and distorted versions of its utopian promise. Commercial porn, in this sense, can be envisaged as a torn shred of carnival, the detritus of a once robust and irreverent tradition. Porn offers the simulacrum of a pan-erotic world where sex is always available, where women are infinitely pliable and always desirous, where sex lurks in every office, street and home, sex without amorous prelude and gloriously free of consequence and responsibility. As real life becomes more repressed and puritanical, the images, paradoxically,

become more debauched, as if in compensation for a lost sexual playfulness. In the age of what Karen Jaehne calls the "Great Detumescence," the on-screen display of sexual abundance plays a role analogous to that of the gild and glitter musicals of the Great Depression. Porn, in this sense, is a diversionary gratification, an attempt to recoup in the domain of sexual fantasy what has been lost in real festivity. While carnival is collective, participatory and public, porn is passive, usually consumed by an aggregation of guilty solitudes, whether by atomized zombies in the porn theatres or in the privatized space of the self-entertaining monad. While carnival comes for free, porn is paid for in cash, check or money order. Although carnival embraces and welcomes eroticism, mere orgasm is not its telos; its goal is playfulness in the broadest sense, a collective jouissance, a felt unity with the community and the cosmos. Rather than carnival's "free and familiar contact," commercial porn offers the anxious commerce of bodies performing ritualized exertions. In the actresses' face we read, usually, the simulation of desire, and on the man's, grim duty, aerobic perseverance, the solitude of the long-distance comer.

Rinse Dream's *Cafe Flesh*, while it does betray some of the phallocentrism which seems to be porn's congenital vice, also provides clues as to a possible transvaluation of porn. The film is set in a post-nuclear cabaret, entertainment centre of a world where 99 percent of earthlings have been rendered incapable of performing sexual activity. In this mutant universe, the survivors break down into those who can and those who can't, and where the majority that can't watch the minority that can. The majority desires love, but the mere touch of any other renders them violently ill. The positives reform, but the negatives can only watch. The film's premise can be seen as triply allegorical. On one level, its division into sex negatives and sex positives can be seen as allegorizing the Social Darwinist division of haves and have-nots, with the property, in this case, being sexual capacity itself. On another level, the film allegorizes the relationship between porn and its audience, between the sex positives who perform on the screen and the sex negatives, the passive audience that observes in the theatre. One might see the film, finally, as proleptically allegorizing the world of AIDS panic, where people want to make love but cannot do it without becoming violently sick, and where the enemy is invisible, invisible like radiation and invisible like AIDS, comparable

in their quiet devastation.

In this connection, we might ask: aren't we being sentimental and nostalgic when we speak about carnival today? What can carnival mean in an age of the loss of community and the waning of affect? What can it mean in the era of what Arthur Kroker calls "panic sex"? Our era seems to have fallen victim to a number of melancholy literalizations. The venerable *leibestod* love/death trope, as countless commentators have pointed out, has been rendered excruciatingly literal by the AIDS virus. (*Cafe Flesh* presciently anticipated this feeling in what amounts to a proleptic elegy for the lost possibilities of sexuality.) Bakhtin's favoured image of grotesque old age giving birth to vibrant new life, similarly, becomes morbidly horrible in the context of AIDS-infected mothers giving birth to AIDS-infected children. But even medieval carnival, we are reminded, took place against the backdrop of real plague and imagined apocalypse. It is this backdrop which explains the skeletons, the candlelight processions, and the at times macabre imagery of medieval feasts. An indispensable accessory of carnival was a set called "Hell," which was mock-solemnly burned at the height of the festivities. Carnival is the feast enjoyed *after* staring death in the face; it is, for Bakhtin, a symbolic victory over fear and paranoia. Carnival is not a cure for AIDS nor can it substitute for political action or medical research, but the spirit of carnival can nourish the principle of hope in an age tending to apocalyptic despair.⁴

Our concern here, in any case, is not with the literal carnival but rather with carnival as a perennial constellation of artistic strategies and symbolic practices. Rosa von Praunheim's *Ein Virus Kennt Keine Moral* (*A Virus Knows no Morals*), in this sense, provides a brilliant example of a "carnavalesque" approach to AIDS. This extraordinarily literate film, in fact, is explicitly rooted in the Menippean tradition going back to Aristophanes, precisely the tradition of which Bakhtin speaks in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The film revolves around the irresponsible proprietor of a gay sauna who lures his customers with "safe sex" pornos from the US but who himself ends up getting AIDS. The action is repeatedly interrupted by the sung commentaries of a parodic "chorus" of transvestites. Among the film's other satirical vignettes: a sinister researcher named Doctor Blood attempts to trace the epidemic to a parodically caricatural Africa, transvestites stage a contempor-

ary version of "The Masque of the Red Death," and a "liberal" government creates a death camp/amusement park called "Hellgayland." Avoiding the twin traps of frivolity and moralism, the film deploys gallows humour not only to alert the audience to the dangers but also to point to possible solutions. (New York screenings of the film were coordinated with concrete efforts to provide information, organize benefits, and press political demands.) The film's Brechtian refrain, sung by the transvestite chorus, sums up the activist stance of the film. To the tune of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," the transvestite chorus sings directly to the camera/audience: "You've got your own fate/in your Hands!" Fatalistic religiosity gives way to activist politics. What moves in the film, finally, is the power of its anger and the audacity of its humour. Von Praunheim combines the evocation of the beauty of gay sexuality with a full apprehension of the AIDS danger, aiming carnivalesque ridicule at the platitudes of demagogic politicians and the puritanical nostrums of the "just-say-no" proponents of the "New Sobriety."

THE GROTESQUE BODY AND THE CULTURE OF LAUGHTER

I began by saying that Bakhtin rarely speaks of sex per se, and that refusal strikes me as itself significant and productive. The word "copulation," in Bakhtin, almost invariably comes accompanied by its close cousins—defecation, urination, perspiration. Bakhtin's view of sexuality is paratactic; in his prose, all the nouns and verbs associated with the grotesque body and the lower stratum inter-fecundate along the same syntagmatic axis. No conceptual hierarchy places copulation, or the "Big O," at the top. Bakhtin, in this sense, stands somewhat outside of what Stephen Heath calls the "sexual fix," the modern hypostatization of sexuality as the imperious *raison d'être* of human existence. Fucking for Bakhtin is inseparable from shitting and pissing and other semi-comic reminders of the body's delectable grotesquerie. His comprehensive vision illuminates, if only by contrast, what is so oppressive about most pornography—its relentless single-mindedness, its obsessive sexualist teleology manifested cinematically by the inexorable zoom-ins to the fuck, the cock, the cunt, its endless repetition of what Luce Irigaray calls the "law of the same." It is this single-mindedness

which generates porn's inevitable loss of aura and mystery. Although sex is auto-telic and self-justifying, when focussed on exclusively it seems to lose its quality and implode. For Bakhtin, sexuality always exists, again, *in relation*, in relation to the general existence of the body, in relation to other persons, in relation to the common social life. Rather than envision sexuality as a series of isolating close-ups on body parts, Bakhtin sees sexuality as a broad, multi-centred canvas, a crowded Brueghelesque space alive with the vital activities of the people. Sex is relativized and relationalized, dispersed across the entire social field.

The culture of laughter is also absolutely central to Bakhtin's conception of carnival, enormous, creative, derisive, renewing laughter that grasps phenomena in the process of change and transition, finding in every victory a defeat and in every defeat a potential victory. In porn as presently constituted, there is little room for laughter; the proceedings are deadly serious. A Bakhtin trans-pornography, if one can imagine such a thing, would be against sex as serious business, both against it being serious and certainly against it being a business. Laughter, for Bakhtin, is itself erotic; it is profound, communitarian, a current passing from self to self in an atmosphere of free and friendly contact. It is the adult memory of the cascading giggles of children, who do not necessarily laugh at specific localizable "jokes" but as part of a collective contagion. Carnavalesque laughter can be raucous, subversive, even angry, a laughter which erases old differences and installs new unstable ones. Bakhtin's theory of laughter accords very well with what Ruby Rich calls "Medusan" feminist films. Rich takes the term from Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," where the French theorist celebrates the potential of feminist texts to "blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter."⁵ Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*, Nelly Kaplan's *A Very Curious Girl*, and Ana Carolina's *Sea of Roses* can all be seen as Medusan films which direct satirical laughter against what Irigaray calls "*l'esprit de serieux*" of phallocentrism. There is a touch of the Medusa in the laughter which explodes in Marleen Gooris' *A Question of Silence*. The film revolves around the legal proceedings against three women, of different classes and unknown to one another, who kill a boutique proprietor about to arrest a woman for shoplifting. The trial is portrayed in keeping with Bakhtin's

description of official rituals—static, formal, hierarchical and predetermined in outcome. When the woman lawyer, Janine, insists that the court consider the murder as the accountable act of three women against a man, the prosecuting counsel protests that he will consider it in exactly the same way as if the women had killed another woman, or if three men had killed a woman. At this point, one of the women, Frau Jongman, responds to this statement with irrepressible laughter. The camera pans over the witnesses, who one by one start to laugh, after which the other murderers join in, and finally Janine. The counsel's denial of difference provokes the mocking laughter of the differentiated, as if in response to Luce Irigaray's rhetorical question: "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from sexual oppression? Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning?"⁶ The court echoing with the derisive laughter of the women provides a powerful image of a utopia of laughter, showing laughter's unifying force, its subversive refusal of ready-made definitions, its intimation of nascent revolutionary collectives.

EROTIC CARNIVALS AND PARODIC CARNIVALIZATION

Carnival, in Bakhtin's conception, is more than a party or festival; it is the oppositional culture of the oppressed, the official world as seen "from below," not the mere overturning of etiquette but the symbolic, anticipatory overthrow of oppressive social structures. Carnival is profoundly egalitarian. It inverts rank, marries social opposites, and redistributes roles according to the "world upside down." Carnival crowns and uncrowns; it pulls grotesque monarchs off their thrones and installs comic lords of misrule in their place. A film which gives an inkling of the contemporary possibilities of this kind of comic crowning and uncrowning is the early '70s film *Tricia's Wedding*. Made and performed by "the Cockettes," a gay transvestite group from San Francisco, the film stages a mock wedding reception for Tricia Nixon on the White House Lawn. A gay anarchist laces the punch with LSD, leading to a comic return of the repressed and symbolic come-uppance of the powerful. The climactic scene, if memory serves me, has Richard Nixon, portrayed up to that point as a homophobic macho obsessed with his virility, make a homo-erotic pass at a Mick Jagger lookalike. In such

a film, bourgeois decorum and the upper reaches of political power are jointly mocked within a grotesque hyperbolic style. (It is perhaps a sign of the times that no film, to my knowledge, has subjected the eminently deserving Ronald Reagan to a similar decrowning.)

Parody, for Bakhtin, is the privileged mode of artistic carnivalization. By appropriating an existing discourse and introducing into it an orientation oblique or even diametrically opposed to that of the original, parody is especially well-suited to the needs of oppositional culture, precisely because it *assumes* the force of the dominant discourse, only to deploy that force, through a kind of artistic jujitsu, *against* domination. A Brazilian film by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade provides a striking example of this tactic. At the height of the military dictatorship in the '60s and '70s, there emerged a genre called the *pornochanchada*, vapid soft-core erotic comedies with titles like *A Bra for Daddy*, *The Secretaries Who Do . . . Everything*, and *The Virgin and the Macho*. The military regime, phenomenally alert to violations of "morality" and "decency" in the films of leftist directors, hypocritically tolerated and even encouraged the *pornochanchadas*. In 1980, De Andrade satirized the genre in his "metapornochanchada" entitled *Tropical Fruit*. In the De Andrade films the object of desire takes the form of a watermelon. The protagonist of the film, that is to say, literally loves watermelons. *Tropical Fruit* demystifies the *pornochanchada* by according to the watermelon the function usually accorded the woman in such films. The protagonist seduces the watermelon as if it were a frightened virgin, deflowers it ritualistically, and subjects it to sado-masochistic perversities. A series of shots achieves what has remained inaccessible to more conventional non-vegetative pornography—shots from inside the pink wetness of the watermelon itself. Thus the film mocks the male spectator's desire to see—and only see—everything! It exposes the self-defeating pornography's Pyrrhic victories against visual taboos. After conquering the contours of the female body, the pudenda, and the vulva, the phallic camera takes the last fortress in a fantastic voyage to the very centre. But the victory is in every sense a hollow one, revealing only the totalitarianism of phallocentric pleasure.

Tropical Fruit also switches the terms of secondary identification of the *pornochanchada*. The woman—usually

cast as the coy sex object—is here the spectator's delegate who asks the protagonist precisely those questions we would have liked to ask. The protagonist, for his part, is scarcely an ideal figure for male projection. While pornochancada protagonists were generally playboys living in luxurious apartments, the protagonist of *Tropical Fruit* is physically unattractive and professionally incompetent. Hardly the macho sexual athlete of the pornochancada, he suffers from premature ejaculation even with his watermelons. In sum, *Tropical Fruit* answers the male voyeur's implicit request for a female sex object by offering an ironically reified, vegetative exemplar of pure alterity. (The Brazilian military government, sensing the insult to machismo in a film completely devoid of nudity and heterosexual or homosexual lovemaking, banned the film, while tolerating the much more explicit pornochancadas which *Tropical Fruit* so acerbically mocked.)

Sauve Qui Peut/(la Vie) (*Every Man for Himself*, 1980), co-authored by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Mieville, also deploys corrosive comedy in order to illuminate the nature of pornography and of masculine desire. The film concretizes scenarios of desire in distanced, often grotesque forms designed less to flatter the spectator than to make the

spectator see him or herself as comic object. The most effective example of this strategy involves a listless four-person "orgy" featuring a businessman, a secretary, a prostitute, and a male assistant. Godard/Mieville stage the sexual fantasies of the businessman. We are shown a technocrat's wet dream—the Taylorization of sexual reproduction. In this utilitarian fantasy—in which Jeremy Bentham meets Wilhelm Reich—sex is programmed and disciplined under the panoptic eye of management. The boss plans the work and sets the procedures. Like a filmmaker, he assigns precise movements and attitudes to his "actors." The image taken care of, he transfers his attention to the soundtrack. Each participant is assigned a diphthong ("ai" "ei")—presumably the signifier of rampant desire—to be repeated at regular intervals. The orgy participants, like assembly-line workers, are reduced to well-defined jerks, twists, moans and quivers. Alphaville sex is displayed as a well-oiled machine. The sex workers are desensitized, emotionless. The boss exercises his patriarchal prerogatives, yet ultimately he cannot enjoy his power. The character Isabelle reads his face and finds "dark pride, terminal despair, arrogance and fear." All this, it goes without saying, is highly anti-erotic. There are no writhing bodies

but only the empty multiplication of sexual signifiers in a kind of caricatural formula of an orgy, an orgy rendered as sign.

TRANSGRESSIVE WRITING

Another strategy for the progressive deployment of eroticism in the cinema is what might be called transgressive writing, in which the violation of sexual taboos is allied to the violation of discursive norms in a two-pronged attack on official discourse. It is the work of Luis Bunuel especially, that forges a direct link between the formal and thematic transgressions of the contemporary avant-garde and the medieval tradition of carnivalesque irreverence. Indeed, the view that reduced Bunuel to the quintessential surrealist is, finally, rather superficial, for Bunuel, who grew up in what he himself called a "medieval" atmosphere and who practiced black masses as a child, ultimately derives his roots from Cervantes and Rabelais and the Middle Ages. Bunuel's erotic-religious attacks on the Church are not mere "surrealist provocations" but rather prolongations of the medieval tradition of desecralization and the "logic of the turnabout." His travesties carry on the proud Spanish tradition of sexualized blasphemy which Bunuel



Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Mieville's *Sauve Qui Peut La Vie*: Illuminating the nature of pornography and masculine desire.



The 'last supper' in Bunuel's *Viridiana* (1961).

praises in his autobiography, a tradition manifested in virtuoso curses, in which "extraordinary vulgarities—referring chiefly to the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, not to mention the Pope—are strung end to end in a series of impressive scatological exclamations." The orgiastic banquet in *Viridiana* prolongs this same spirit, making an artistic mansion the scene of a carnivalesque banquet, in the tradition of the "grotesque symposia," often parodying the Last Supper, in which higher powers were ridiculed and symbolically "brought low." The religious-erotic travesties so frequent in Bunuel's films—Christ as the Marquis de Sade in *L'Age d'Or*, the parodistic liturgies of *Simon of the Desert* form surrealist-inflected version of the Cyprian Feasts and *parodia sacra* of medieval carnival.

Rabelais, for Bakhtin, remained misunderstood because of his "non-literary" nature, i.e. because of the non-conformity of his images and language to the norms and canons predominant in the 16th century. It is in this link between formal and social sexual transgression that Bakhtin's carnival betrays its deep structural connection to the practices of the avant-garde. Bunuel was personally and artistically close to George Bataille and both artists have undeniable affinities with Bakhtin. Bataille's accounts of ritual transgressions mingling intense pleasure (at the exceeding of boundaries) and intense anguish

(at the realization of the force of the norms) evokes a slightly more morbid version of Bakhtin's carnival. Both Bunuel and Bataille deploy eroticism as a crucial strategy in a deeply transgressive kind of *écriture* which displays a kind of isomorphism between the violation of sexual taboos and the violation of discursive norms, a subject explored by Susan Sontag in "The Pornographic Imagination," and by Susan Suleiman in "Pornography and the Avant-Garde."⁶ For both Sontag and Suleiman, the transgressive thrust of Bataille's work, especially his pornographic fictions, must be read as a metaphor for the transgressive use of language. The sexually scandalous scenes of *Story of the Eye* are there to signify Bataille's scandalous verbal violations, and not vice versa. In Bunuel's case, formal cinematic and narrative transgressions, what Bakhtin would call a *grammatica jocosa*, are allied to the ludic-erotic questioning of all social decorums. And with both Bunuel and Bataille, sexuality is wielded in relation, for its primordial power of scandal.

The work of Jean Genet, one of the few artists who Cixous mentions as capable of "bisexual writing," offers another example of transgressive *écriture*. Genet's plays, such as *Les Noir* and *Les Bonnes*, are premised on carnival-style ritual overturnings (or parodic colonial mimicry) symptomatic of the world as seen "from below." Genet's

short film *Chant d'Amour* powerfully evokes the power of eroticism as the literal breaker-down-of-walls, revealing the world as seen from the "below" of the homosexual prisoner. In the film, prisoners in solitary confinement literally ram the prison walls with their desire, swaying convulsively and kissing their own bodies in a kind of frenzy of erotic frustration and delight. Two prisoners in adjoining cells conspire to defy the authorities and make love despite the walls, by alternately blowing and inhaling each other's smoke through a straw in the wall opening as they masturbate. Eroticism is shown as a subversive force against the Law, here incarnated by the figure of the repressed gay guard, in a film whose irrepressible and transgressive erotic energy explodes against the forces of puritanism, racism, homophobia and repression.

TOWARDS A TRANSLINGUISTICS OF EROTICISM

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Bakhtin/Voloshinov sketch out a social-materialist theory of language, an area which had constituted a kind of missing term within leftist thought. Decades before the "critique of the sign" of the '60s, they proposed a post-Saussurean "trans-linguistics," i.e. a theory of the role of signs in human life

and social practice. Rejecting the privileging of linguistic system (*langue*) over actual speech (*parole*) which constitutes the founding gesture of Saussurean linguistics, they stress *parole*, language as lived and shared by historical subjects in social interaction. The reality of language-speech, for Bakhtin/Voloshinov, is not the abstract combinatory of linguistic forms, or even the isolated monologic utterance, but rather the social event of verbal and non-verbal communication implemented in utterances, a social event inevitably overlaid by history, imbricated with ideology, and inflected by asymmetrical power arrangements.

The Bakhtin/Voloshinov definition of "utterance" and "discourse" and "text" is extremely broad. A discursive utterance, for example, might take the form of inner speech, ordinary conversation, written text, iconic artifact, and, we may extrapolate, imagined or real-life erotic encounters. It is within this broad conception that Bakhtin/Voloshinov develop the notion of what they call, somewhat improbably, "tact." (I say "improbably," because we associate tact with questions of etiquette and diplomacy, whereas Bakhtin/Voloshinov intend the word in its musical sense, as that which sets the basic meter.) "Tact" refers to the "ensemble of codes governing discursive interaction," including those codes that have to do with economic and political power. The concept of "tact" is extremely suggestive for cultural work, pointing to the possibility of a politically-informed discourse analysis of concrete social exchanges, including erotic exchanges. An erotic exchange in film for example, might be analyzed as a product of the relations between all the interlocutors (on- and off-screen), the concrete situation of the "conversation," and the aggregate of social relationships and ideological horizons informing the discourse. At the centre of any erotic film, we find the dialogical or non-dialogical interplay of sexually speaking (or listening) subjects, of persons in literal or metaphorical dialogue. In the wings, meanwhile, there are the unheard and unseen participants—the filmmakers and the producers hoping for a profit. And in the theatre or at home, the audience with which the film also dialogues, an audience traversed by contradictions involving gender, class, sexual preference, race, age and politics. Erotic "tact," in film and in life, would be determined, in a Bakhtinian view, by the aggregate of enveloping social relationships—e.g. the ambient reality of patriarchy and homophobia—the

ideological horizons or the erotic interlocutors (e.g. the interiorized myths and ideologies animating them)—and the concrete situation enveloping the interlocutors—for example, two gay lovers in a situation of homophobia and discrimination, boss and secretary in a situation of sexual harassment and so forth.

Bakhtin/Voloshinov highlight what might be called the linguistic dimension of social struggle. Human beings are not simply born into language as a master code; they grow into it, are shaped by it, and help shape it, as woman or man, worker or boss, peasant or landowner. Every apparently unified linguistic community is characterized by what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia," i.e. the dialogically inter-related speech practices operative in a given society. Language thus becomes the space of confrontation of differently oriented social accents; different social consciousnesses fight it out on the terrain of language. There is no political struggle, for Bakhtin/Voloshinov, that does not also pass through the word, not only in obvious conflicts concerning bilingual education or official tongues, but wherever the questions of languages becomes involved with asymmetrical power arrangements. Patriarchal oppression, as feminist socio-linguists have pointed out, also passes through language, as does women's resistance to that oppression. *Sauve Qui Peut/(la Vie)* especially highlights the non-reciprocity of linguistic exchange between men and women. The prostitute Isabelle calls her clients "monsieur"; they do not call her "Madame." The boss, exercising his male prerogative as arbiter of female beauty, obliges his secretary to say: "My tits aren't fantastic." She cannot oblige him to say "My pot belly's unattractive." Isabelle's pimps spank her—a quintessential gesture of paternalistic infantilization—and force her to admit that no woman, be she duchess, secretary, or tennis champion, can be truly independent. One of the businessmen who rents Isabelle's body is named, significantly, "Mr. Personne." The john, the man with the cash, is a person, a subject, while the prostitute is differentially defined as non-person, object. Yet in the end the designation reverberates ironically, since "*personne*," in French, can also mean "no-one." It is he who is no-one, he who is demeaned, reduced to the actantial function of the paying customer (the trickster "tricked"); it is he who de-personalizes himself.⁷

What Bakhtin calls "intonation," is simply the consequence of "tact." Lying on the border of the verbal and the non-

verbal, it constitutes a subtle conduit and fashioner of social relations. It is through intonation that the speaker establishes contact with a listener. Social through and through, it serves as a barometer of alterations in the social atmosphere. It is useful to approach *Sauve Qui Peut/(la Vie)*, I think, in terms of social and sexual "intonation" and "tact." The film features, for example, a kind of temporal experiment in the form of 15 saccadic "skids"—variations of stop-action or slow-motion movement—which interrupt the more conventional 24-frames per second defilement of the rest of the film.

A striking proportion of the slowed segments have to do with relations between men and women. Godard-Mieville probe the formulaic nature of conventional movie slaps, kisses, embraces. Usually stereotyped actions are revealed to cover a multiplicity of instances, each with its nuances. The filmmakers especially pinpoint the epidermic abrasiveness of contemporary sexual relations. At times this abrasiveness is explicitly violent—Isabelle getting knocked around by her pimps—and at times more subtle and indirect.

We see Paul advance toward Isabelle in pulsingly retarded movement, gradually occupying her space. As she watches warily, we seem to be witnessing a phallic incursion, a mini-rape. Later, Paul embraces, or better, falls upon Denise in a noisy slow-motion collision, crystallizing a situation in which lovers find it virtually impossible to touch without bruising. The film, in such moments, dissects what Foucault would call the capillary forms of power, the ways that power seeps into the grain of everyday life and penetrates the smallest gestures.

Or, to switch to semiotic language, the film analyzes sexual proxemics, the codes regulating inter-personal touching within the context of a phallographic "tact" and misogynistic "intonation."

One imagines the possibility of another kind of erotic film, one exploring the subtle differences in erotic proxemics and interlocation between mother and daughter, father and daughter, father and son, mother and son, sister and brother, between homosexual lovers, heterosexual lovers. One imagines the possibilities of films which might advance the semiotic analysis of the tact of everyday erotic life. One imagines, for example, an entire film devoted to a brief kiss or act of love, analyzed into an infinitude of tiny utterances, mini-foci of resistance, collaboration, aggression, incomprehension, or of generosity, anticipation, sharing, wit.

SEXUAL DIALOGISM

The notion of "tact" applies not only to verbal or erotic exchanges within films (or in life) but also figuratively to the "tact" involved in the metaphorical dialogue between film and spectator. What might be the implicit tact of relationships between an erotic film and its audience? How do the dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène* evoke intimacy or distance, complicity or suspicion, camaraderie or domination? What address toward the audience is implied? Does the film assume an intelligent interlocutor of a moronic one? Does it assume an interlocutor of a specific gender or class? What kind of interlocation does porn promote, and can one imagine an alternative form? Might sexually—explicit films develop a different kind of tact, one which goes beyond the capitalized circulation of the bodies of women?

David James has suggested one answer in his brilliant observations about California Erotic Video Circles, where couples, in order to share and intensify the customary fun of coupling, tape themselves making love and invite similar taped responses from other couples.⁸ Here, James argues, there is no commercial motivation; all that is expected is a responding video-tape in return. While conventional porn tends to efface the apparatus, here the performers acknowledge the camera and often observe themselves on monitors. In porn, the performers' pleasure is subordinated to the instrumentality of commodity production; the rhythm of sexual activity is disrupted by the industrial requirements of conventional shooting procedures. But with the Video Circle tapes the participants' pleasure is paramount and largely determines the textual organization. Here, James continues, there are not fetishistic close-ups or intra-sequential editing, no montage of genital contact, and no ritual obeisance to the most ubiquitous trope of porn—the close-up on the male's ejaculation. Rather than pornography's "rendezvous manque" between exhibitionist and voyeur, premised on the impossibility of actual contact between performer and spectator, these video-tapes advertise the possibility of actual contact and even propose what James calls a "social network of desire," outside commodity relations and outside the control of the mafia and the corporations. They propose that others join the tape network as producers and potentially as partners without technological mediation. While it would be naive to idealize such experiments, as if they took place outside of patriarchy

and homophobia, outside of the "aggregate of social relationships," they do suggest, at least, the *theoretical* possibility, within a radically re-ordered society, of persons, couples, and groups nourishing an eroticism founded not on the individual gaze but rather on a shared experience, of desire not as the pursuit of a fading object but as a communal current which passes between persons, where sexual play, itself a kind of conversation, would be dialogically amplified within a community of erotic aspiration.

An erotic "translinguistics," finally, would propose a communicative model of sexual interlocation. It would "get to the bottom" of the old metaphor of sexuality as a *lingua franca*, much as Metz tried to get to the bottom of the old metaphor of "film language." A Bakhtinian model would draw its metaphors not from the domains of conquest ("penetration"), or labour ("working at sex") or hygienics ("healthy relationships") but rather from the meta-language of self-aware signification and communication. A Bakhtinian "translinguistics" of eroticism would speak of sexual heteroglossia, i.e. the many-languagedness of sexual pleasure and practice, what Helene Cixous calls the "thousands of tongues" of eroticism. An erotic trans-linguistics would look for "dialogism" on every level—interpersonal, intra-textual, intertextual, inter-spectatorial—and combat an array of monologisms—the monologism of patriarchy, of heterosexism, or puritanism. Its emphasis would be not on uni-

lateral desire but rather on what Bakhtin would call the "in-between" of erotic interlocation. □

NOTES

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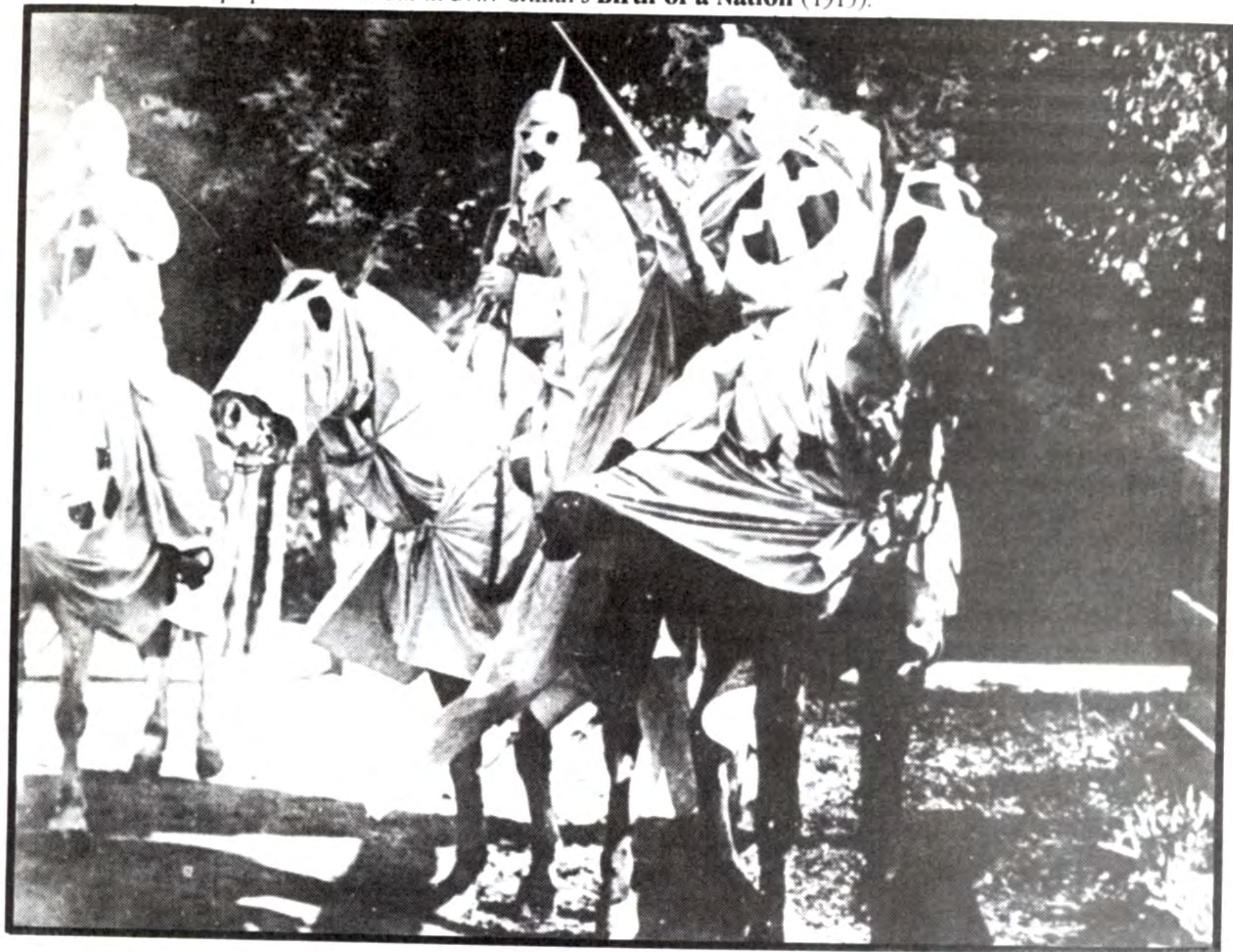
1. See Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkelraut, **Le Nouveau Désordre Amoureux** (Paris: Seuil, 1977).
2. See Luce Irigaray, **This Sex Which Is Not One** (Ithaca: Cornell, 1985), p. 200.
3. The words are Amos Vogel's in **Film as a Subversive Art** (New York: Random House, 1974).
4. Real-life carnivals, for example in Brazil, have begun not only to take prophylactic measures against the spread of AIDS but also to thematize AIDS in satirical placards, floats and costumes.
5. See Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," **Signs** 1, No. 4 (1976). For the Ruby Rich article, see "In the Name of Feminist Criticism," in Bill Nichols, **Movies and Methods II** (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).
6. See Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," in **Styles of Radical Will** (New York: Delta, 1981) and Susan Suleiman, "Pornography and the Avant-Garde," in **The Poetics of Gender** (New York: Columbia, 1986).
7. One of the pleasing inversion of **Sauve Qui Peut/ (la Vie)** and of another film about prostitution, Lizzie Borden's **Working Girls**, is that it ultimately de-personalizes the johns and re-personalizes the prostitutes.
8. David James' talk, entitled "Hardcore: Resistance (?) in the Postmodern," was presented as part of a panel chaired by Michael Renou at the SCS Conference in Montreal (June 1987).

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Sexual Representation
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The Ku Klux Klan prepares for combat in D.W. Griffith's **Birth of a Nation** (1915).



Rethinking The Pink:

Miscegenation and *Something Wild's* Thin Sheen of Race

by Cameron Bailey

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step . . . She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*

She covered her arms, both of them were covered with rings and jewellery, accoutrements of black, Satanistic—please, I'm on TV.

THE "COUNTRY SQUIRE" IN *SOMETHING WILD*

Wild thing,
You make my heart sing.

THE TROGGS, "WILD THING"

SINCE THE CAVALRY RODE MANFULLY across the cross-cutting to save Miss Gish from those awful black men in *Birth of a Nation*, since Barbara Apollonia Chalupiec became Pola Negri and took up a position as Hollywood's resident Other, black sexuality, indeed anything other than white sexuality, has been a potent threat and attraction in American film. The darker it gets, the hotter it gets, and the bad, bad thoughts put into the minds of Griffiths' darkies were hot enough to set good white heroes and heroines trembling for decades. Danger, we know, lurks in a capital-O Other: transgression has long been Hollywood's darkest sin, and its surest box-office draw.

All this has a history, of course. *Othello*, Manet's *Olympia*, *Heart of Darkness* and countless European travel journals link the non-white "races" with a heightened sexuality as a



Lulu's bodily decorations perform the function of sexual signs.



LEFT: Excess masculinity in the dark figure of Ray. RIGHT: Audrey: the transition from subject to object.

matter of course (Gilman, *passim*). Anthropological and medical authorities at the turn of the century invented an evolutionary scale that placed Africans at the bottom of humanity's ladder and Oxbridge-educated men at the top. One of the most important criteria was sex. To the 19th century "man of science," treading water between Darwin and Freud, sex was an important, but as yet fully untapped wellspring of theory. He knew it was significant but had not yet decided what could be done with it. And so he went about measuring genitalia and quantifying 'sex drives,' convinced that the results would provide an indicator to one's position in God's world. Black women never fared too well. Based on Hottentot physiology (as documented by European male scientists) it was deduced that the black female possessed "not only a 'primitive' sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament—'primitive' genitalia" (Gilman, 232). Black men, of course, were empirically proven to be endowed with oversized, "primitive" sexual organs as well. Enlarged labia, big buttocks and monstrous penises loomed large in the 19th century scientist's imagination as fearsome signifiers, signifiers of an animal-like hypersexuality that was threatening in its force.

Enter Jonathan Demme. Worlds away from the starched pseudo-science of the last century, he works in the biggest self-described melting pot the planet has ever seen, creating a reputation for hip, stylish films with more than the expected degree of subtlety. Why then is his *Something Wild* such a throwback? Why is its treatment of race (once you get past the outward hip awareness) so limited? Why does the film treat blacks in such a fawning, ultimately repressive, manner? At least part of the answer is tied up with the New York "attitude" in Demme's films (and Susan Seidelman's, and Jim Jarmusch's, etc.). New York City, for all its snide insularity, is always looking beyond its borders for cultures to raid, hoping to find something exotic enough not to be normalized in its urban hothouse, yet normal enough to be owned. Xenophilia (and its cousin urban ennui) seem to drive the

New York art scene, and in New York the films try hard to cop a little art.

Demme's *Something Wild*, for all its urbanity, cannot escape its own unease about the fact of blacks. It seems not to know what to do with them, so it strews black faces across the background of the film, providing a literal local colour that guarantees the film hip credibility. Jim Hoberman notices this to be something common to the recent crop of "hip" American features:

The burden of Otherness is shouldered by blacks, and it's illuminating to ponder their role. Whether cast as *Blue Velvet*'s blind seer or *True Stories*'s voodoo priest, disguised as Jarmusch's nouveau White Negro or scattered over the landscape in *Something Wild*, this Other remains reproachful, unassimilated, establishing the margins of representation. (8)

That almost every black we see in the film is linked with music—the rappers at the gas station, the man playing the blues harp outside the church, the church congregation itself, the young man at the beginning of the film carrying a huge portable radio, Dottie the waitress who sings the revised "Wild Thing," and more—is an indication of the film's limited, voyeuristic approach to black culture.¹ They might as well be shucking and jiving; certainly they are little more than decoration. Here Demme falls into the trap of that old stereotype—the black as exotic. The pattern is to portray blacks as more vital or elemental than whites; never far behind this is the implication that the black is more primitive or animal-like. The focus rests on the senses, on excess appetites. The predominant physical stereotypes of blacks, the stereotypes that still hold currency in American film—bulging eyes, thick lips, wide noses, enlarged sexual organs—turn the black into a rampaging figure of excess sensuality. The sensual organs admit more than is 'tasteful'; they are in bad taste because they are so *obvious*. The black's senses, in the white paradigm, consume too much.

The something "wild" in the film is the presence of race

(and, to some extent, class) that threatens to disrupt the domesticated, urban world as represented by Charlie Driggs. That wildness is present not just in the black extras that populate the film, but also in the character of Lulu. Lulu is the element of wildness that catapults Charlie into the exciting world of chaos, and she is imaged (before she reverts to Audrey) as a white idea of an exotic, black woman, a wild thing, an unpredictable cipher.

The repetition of the words "wild" and "thing" in both the film's title and the title of its theme song point up what is most threatening about the 'wildness' of race—it is unknown, indeterminate, a "thing." Inscrutability has always been an important element of the exotic, and the concept "black" has traditionally been associated in Western culture with all that is evil and inscrutable. Blackness is inextricably linked with darkness, and darkness means the underworld, the fearsome, unknowable Other. Black, as concept, is not merely marginal to white, it is its antithesis. One might argue that "black" and "white" are only names, but names are important;² the abstraction of pink and brown people into polar opposites had its reasons and its results. As Jacques Derrida has argued, Western metaphysics has always privileged one term in a binary opposition over the other; one need not reason long and hard to determine which term reigns in this pair.

Demme tries hard to close the gap between black and white in the film, with ludicrous results. Ignoring the realities of America's political and cultural polarizations, he gives his white characters an extraordinary (and unrealistic) sensitivity to black culture. One of the women who run the kitsch shop where Charlie buys his first change of clothes³ wears a T-shirt advertising the political British reggae band Steel Pulse. Demme takes his fantasy farther during the class reunion sequence. It is presented as a riot of racial intermingling, with interracial couples dancing contently, and gentle kibbutzing between Charlie and a stagey blackdancer, all culminating in Charlie's (pale) imitation of the moonwalk.⁴ This strategy of making otherness accessible, of obliterating troubling differences is not just objectionable, it is dangerous. It is a profoundly conservative kind of wish-fulfillment to ignore the violence and resentment that forms the basis of relationships between blacks and whites in America; Demme's postcard view of blacks and black culture is a snapshot of a *performance*—blacks dancing, singing and making jokes. He follows the old strategy of the frightened racist—put them up on stage, because everybody knows that the stage isn't real, and what isn't real can never hurt you. Not too surprisingly, the only multi-dimensional black character in the film is Lulu.

Within the context of the film, "Lulu" functions as a palimpsest written over the Dottie character. She is the politicized black female read through a white suburban sensibility—Audrey's.⁵ Dottie parades her politics on her body, wearing the red, gold, black and green of Ethiopian liberation, her clothing a mix of '60s pacifism and black activism. Lulu's dress mimics Dottie's—she too wears the Ethiopian colours—but her excess of Africana (bracelets, necklaces, pendants, etc.) moves past political commitment into the stylistic appropriation of fashion. She is decorated, a walking jangle of arty signifiers. Her pendant adorned with the image of the African continent, for example, literalizes Freud's "dark continent" metaphor (Standard Ed. 20:212). Her apartment, which we see only near the end of the film, is decorated in a sort of Afro-Christian postmodern style.

The connection between Lulu and Dottie is cinematic as well as thematic. The film's first shot of Lulu (she is reading a biography of Frida Kahlo) is preceded immediately by an

establishing shot of the restaurant, in which Dottie crosses in the foreground. As she exits the frame, leaving her trace upon the viewer, we cut to Lulu. And Lulu's first act is to impersonate Dottie—she takes on her function by stopping Charlie when he fails to pay his cheque (an action Dottie repeats at the end of the film).

Lulu, then, is not modelled on a general black woman; the film is rarely so crude as to present a single image as representative. Her model, Dottie, is an Afro-conscious, urban American, politicized black woman. But the parallels are accomplished almost solely through externals—clothing, jewellery, etc. Beyond a sort of suburban anarchy, there is no indication that Audrey/Lulu is in any way political.⁶ Lulu's "blackness" is written in fashion symbols on the surface of her body, and as such, is as much about sex as it is about politics. Stereotypes of black women in Western culture tend to exist at the juncture of received ideas about blackness and about the feminine, and are therefore necessarily based in the body: the figure of the temptress or wanton woman, for example, is linked to the myth of black prurience; the 'maternal instinct' to the black's 'instinctive feel' for the rhythms of nature. Black women in Western literature, painting and film are thus imaged either as (large) intuitive mother figures, or as the human embodiment of animal sexuality. In both cases the physicality of the black woman is important; her body is the site of Western male projections of desire and repulsion. What that means in Lulu's case is that bodily decorations perform the function of sexual signs. This plays on the popularly held notion that an unadorned body is ascetic and desexualized, and that a profusion of jewellery and accessories possesses a fetishistic, sexual allure. Kim Sawchuk suggests that

fashionable behaviour is never simply a question of creativity of self-expression; it is also a mark of colonization, the "anchoring" of our bodies, particularly the bodies of women, into specific positions. (53)

The position in Lulu's case can only be sexual.

Lulu is primarily *about* sex (from the position of active subject), while the Audrey to which she reverts is a victim character. In a standard conflation of a sexualized woman with a prostitute, Charlie momentarily misunderstands Lulu's intentions, but she reassures him: she wants money "for the room. Everything else is free." But when Lulu becomes Audrey once more, when she becomes "white" again, her sexuality goes into remission; she becomes just another female plot device present to motivate the male characters' actions.

ONE CAN COMPARE THE SEDUCTION SCENE in the motel at the beginning of the film with Ray's rampage and murder at the film's end as an index of Audrey/Lulu's transition from subject to object. Lulu initiates the seduction, first by 'kidnapping' Charlie, then by ridding him of *his* accessories. If Lulu's trinkets and pendants, etc. are indicators of her sexuality, Charlie's telepager and umbrella and newspaper are regulators of desire, instruments of civilized order. If they are phallic it is in the sense of the Law, not the erotic. Charlie is in bondage throughout most of the film; and the handcuffs he wears are only one symbol of that.

It is in the sex scene itself that Demme's concern with "ethnic" icons is most obvious. Lulu's anthropomorphic, blackface tape machine, the reggae she turns on to turn on to (Big Youth's "Feel It"), and the carved figure and gourd instruments she shakes at Charlie in mock menace all become weighed down with exotic Significance; it is as if she is simul-

taneously assaulting and tantalizing him with the Third World. If there is a motivation for the name of the film's production company—Religioso Primitiva—this is where it lies: Lulu's performance in this scene is a mix of voodoo totemism and sex trade tease. But the handcuffs are the central icon in this scene. Lulu pulls them from a watermelon-print bag and asks seductively, "You game?" In fact it is a game, and like most games, includes a large measure of antagonism. Lulu's role in the game is to act "wild," to threaten Charlie with "uncivilized" forces, hence her comment "You look good enough to eat," and her attempt to embarrass Charlie by calling his boss at work. To the white, "civilized" world as represented by Charlie, the intrusion of sex into corporate life, especially sex this illicit, constitutes the breaking of a taboo. And that puts it on a par with Lulu's threatened sexual cannibalism.

Throughout the film, Charlie's body is violated as his familiar social world is broken down. Both in the sex scene and the final confrontation with Ray, he is thrown around, handcuffed, and acted upon in the aim of some transcendent goal—orgasm in one case, torture and murder in the other. In the second case Ray replaces Lulu/Audrey as the agent acting upon Charlie:⁷ he handcuffs Charlie as she had; he throws Charlie onto the bathroom floor as she had thrown him onto the bed; he holds the anticipation of death over him as she had held the anticipation of orgasm—both insist on delaying it, on taking pleasure from Charlie's discomfort. There is even an identical use of handheld camera in the two scenes, although the later scene is on the whole more stylized, set in close-ups against the American Standard white of Charlie's spotless suburban bathroom. Charlie finally repays his tormentors by penetrating Ray—fatally. The figure of domesticity and "civilization" defeats his doppelganger (compositions and dress make the similarities between Ray and Charlie especially clear in the bathroom scene); and this is seen as some sort of transcendent, though touchingly tragic, attainment of true masculinity. Ray's steel-capped black leather boots, his black handgun, and black Cadillac had all served as symbols of his excess masculinity. Charlie's station wagon came up short (and limp) in comparison with Ray's rolling appendage.

But Charlie wins, because—well, because he is constructed as the hero, in very traditional terms. This triumph of light over darkness, "hero" over "beast" corresponds to a triumph of city over outland (or "civilization" over "barbarism," an old struggle in American culture), and dominant class over under-class. That struggle is negotiated through the sexual token called Audrey, who acts as a sort of sliding signifier of resistance, crossing those rigid boundaries of place, race, and class. She shifts easily from Manhattan to the outlands, from the world of her potty-genteel mother to Ray's rowhouse hell, and from an ersatz Dottie to an '80s Debbie Reynolds. Her final incarnation borrows from the upper-class style of another generation; she looks as if she just stepped from a Fitzgerald novel. Ray, the hero, gains by confronting his darker side; when reduced to this level, *Something Wild* follows the plots of hundreds of westerns and films noir. Its difference—urban hipness, and an attempt to approach race, are in fact what give the film its problematic, but interesting nature.

FOOTNOTES

1. Demme makes a bizarre link between himself and black culture by superimposing his director's credit over the image of the black man with the radio. The shot is held for a duration to strengthen its significance: the credit for direction, carrying with it overtones of mastery and ownership, superimposed over a black urban American icon. The shot does not so

much identify Demme with black culture as it betrays his intended dominance over it.

2. Whether the name is Negro, Negre, Nero, Negerou, or Schwartzner, the connection between people of African descent and the colour (and concept) black is always explicit. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, traces the derivation of Negro to the latin *nigrum* or *niger*, meaning black (*OED*, v. 7, 82).
3. The two women are Dorothy Demme and Emma Byrne, Jonathan and David's moms, one presumes. This is another example of the in-group feel to the film.
4. It's interesting to note that the reunion commemorates the "Spirit of '76," because the event cloaks itself in the same hypocrisy as the American Bicentennial: confidence and community whitewash a country spiralling in a dangerous economic and spiritual decline.
5. The character called "Lulu" of course draws on many other sources external to the film: Louise Brooks, Frida Kahlo, Winnie Mandela (she also reads her biography in one scene), and countless strong, unpredictable heroines of screwball comedies.
6. That she reads a biography of Winnie Mandela seems more a directorial flourish than an organically-derived action. At best, Audrey might have a personal interest in stories of liberation, though not in South African politics.
7. It would be facile (and a weak case) to say that Ray is also imaged as a black in the film, although there is some shading in that direction. He brags about returning unnoticed into a store he had just robbed: "Half the time they thought it was some spook that did it." Later he says, "I used to spar around in the joint. It was just me and a bunch of the brothers." His connection with black males is through the stereotypes of the criminal and the athlete.

But Ray's disruptive force in the film is more the force of class difference. Ray invades the middle-class comfort that Charlie takes for granted, and that Audrey strives for. In some ways he serves the same function as Dennis Hopper's character in *Blue Velvet*: he represents the nihilistic energy of the criminal class.

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Jean Vigo on the set of **L'Atalante**.

L'ATALANTE: The Limits of Liberation

By Robin Wood

THE CINEMA OF JEAN VIGO HAS HABITUALLY been discussed in terms of its potential for liberation, specifically in relation to anarchism (Vigo's father died in prison, perhaps murdered for his ultra-leftist views) and Surrealism. I want to examine here the validity of this position with reference to his most fully realized, complex and remarkable work, *L'Atalante*, and the bounds within which this drive towards liberation is contained. A convenient starting-point seems to me a comparison of the film with F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise*; my argument will be centred upon, but by no means restricted to, the two films' treatment of the erotic.

The two films may at first glance seem so remote from each other in background, atmosphere, ethos, that there is little point in juxtaposing and comparing them. In terms of fundamental narrative concerns, however, they have a surprising amount in common. Both start (admittedly, like thousands of other films) from what is arguably the central problematic of western culture—the problematic of the heterosexual couple. The development of each is precipitated by a threat to the couple (in *Sunrise*, the City Woman, in *L'Atalante* Père Jules and subsequently the peddler). Both move towards the elimination or defusing of the threat and the triumphant restoration of the marriage union. Both are structured on similar oppositions: country/city (*Sunrise*), barge life/city (*L'Atalante*). The definition of the couple, the nature of the threat, the process of resolution, all these are markedly different. Behind the differences are not only two strongly contrasted artistic personalities but the cultural traditions of Germany and France: more specifically, the differences between Expressionism and Surrealism.

L'Atalante is not, of course, a Surrealist film, any more (or any less) than *Sunrise* is an Expressionist film. But I believe its relationship to Surrealism is very strong. There is the evidence of Vigo's own personal commitment to Surrealist art and principles (he wrote a brief but eloquent eulogy of *Un Chien Andalou*). More important, there is the internal evidence of the film itself. Admittedly, its juxtapositions are always circumscribed by the dictates of 'Realism,' the plausible. Yet in image after image, sequence after sequence, the juxtapositions startle the viewer into a new, heightened, consciousness: the boy bearing the tangled mass of creeper with which he intends to greet the bride, looking like a sub-proletarian nature-God; Juliette on the barge in her bride's dress; the isolated house the barge passes, in which the lights suddenly go on; the astonishing sequence of erotic longing in which the lovers, separated, express their yearning for each other by caressing their own bodies; Jean's hallucination of Juliette, in her bride's dress, under water; all testify to the potent presence of the Surrealist movement as an impulse crucial to the film's energies. Above all, there is Père Jules' cabin, in itself a little domain of the surreal—the marvellous: refuge from an outside world generally governed by the operations of materialistic capitalism.

More generally, the film everywhere expresses the Surrealist commitment to impulse and spontaneity. There are

obvious problems with the notion of 'spontaneity' in relation to film-making (shots have to be set up, the movement of actors must be rehearsed in relation to the camera, etc.). Yet it seems valid to employ the concept in terms of effect and degree. On all levels, *L'Atalante* manifests a spontaneity of invention that contrasts markedly with the deliberate artifice of *Sunrise*: dramatic incident and incidental 'business'; acting and characterization; framing (compositions that seldom look 'composed,' unselfconsciously asymmetrical); camera position and actors' movements (see, for example, the shot in which Jean crawls along the deck of the barge towards Juliette, first *into* and then *over* the camera); editing (the use of the kinds of jumpcut Godard 'invented' nearly 30 years later: it is easy to see why the film was such a favourite of the New Wave). Many of the cinematic devices and effects are very difficult to explain or justify in terms of academic-traditional 'style expresses content' aesthetics; they relate less to the specific 'meaning' of the action than to the general fidelity to freedom and impulse. This readiness to surrender to the 'spontaneous' is as true to the spirit of Surrealism as the applied art of *Sunrise* is to that of Expressionism. One should qualify this by noting that such a *degree* of spontaneity became possible only with the advent of sound. The silent cinema's reliance on gesture and facial expression for the communication of meaning (an art that reached its peak in *Sunrise*) demanded acting that was carefully worked out and worked over, with camera positions chosen to serve it.

Expressionism and Surrealism have been too often lumped together as the two great manifestations of the *avant-garde* in the first half of the century. George Lukacs attacked, and Ernst Bloch defended, both, more or less indiscriminately, as the alternative to Realism. Spiritually, the two movements are worlds apart. I see little reason to take exception to Lukacs' observation that "the Fascists were not without justification in discerning in Expressionism a heritage they could use"—provided it is taken *as* an observation, not a value-judgement. (Neither individuals nor movements are necessarily to be blamed for the uses to which posterity puts them. Christ is not to be blamed for St. Paul, nor Marx for Stalin, and Wagner's *Ring* cycle has quite other, even contradictory, potential uses than to stand as an apology for Nazism.) The emotions that Expressionism most characteristically expresses—despair, anguish, terror, breakdown—are predominantly negative. There is no necessary reason why the Expressionist ethos should lead to, or make possible, Fascism; at the same time, Fascism is one possible response to the Expressionist testimony to decadence and disintegration.

One must beware, however, of simplistically opposing Expressionism and Surrealism in reaction to their potential for Fascist appropriation. Indeed, for all the Surrealists' commitment to notions of liberation, and lip-service (at least in the early manifestos) to Marx, there are obvious aspects of the Surrealist ethos that might lend themselves *positively* to Fascist use: the emphasis on ruthlessness, on the right of the privileged individual to pursue his urges at any price (Bunuel's description of *Un Chien Andalou* as "only a desperate and passionate appeal to murder" should not be taken lightly), combining with the insistent celebration of *masculine*

passion and the contemptuous rejection of homosexuality that led to Cocteau's exclusion from the 'official' Surrealist group.

The essential difference between the two movements (as manifested both in their writings and their art) lies in their attitudes to the unconscious. Both were heavily indebted to Freud (a much more decisive presence here than Marx): neither movement is conceivable without the theory of repression as major determinant. But the ways in which 'the repressed' is envisaged differ markedly. In Expressionist art the repressed is, characteristically, a terrible dark force whose eruption is irresistible but which, once released, is destructive and uncontrollable: the figure of Nosferatu in Murnau's film of that name can stand as archetype. The surrealists, on the contrary, explicitly welcomed the eruption of the repressed as the undeniable prerequisite to liberation: its very dangerousness was conceived positively, as the necessary means to the overthrow of bourgeois 'reality' and the emergence of the *authentic* reality it conceals. Surrealism belongs very clearly to the long and honourable revolutionary tradition in French culture, of which the French Revolution itself, the Paris Commune, the New Wave, and the events of May 1968, are other various manifestations.

The differences between the characteristic techniques developed within Expressionist and Surrealist painting point to interesting conclusions in relation to the cinema. It can be argued that film may be inherently inimical—at least to a certain degree—to the principles of Expressionism, based on the systematic distortion of appearances. The same is clearly not true of Surrealism, which creates its disturbing effects

through the incongruous juxtaposition of objects painted with *trompe l'oeil* 'realist' accuracy. Yet the incorporation of Surrealism into mainstream cinema has been even more restricted than is the case with Expressionism (which at least proved a potential source of subjective effects and dream sequences, as well as more generally influencing the styles of certain genres such as the horror movie and *film noir*). The incongruous juxtapositions that have delighted the Surrealists in Hollywood movies have been largely inadvertent; Dali's designs for Gregory Peck's dream in *Spellbound* were modified by the studio and the sequence drastically abridged. If the cinema has relegated Surrealism to the *avant-garde* margins, that has nothing to do with ontological incompatibility and everything with ideological threat: mainstream cinema has been dedicated—in terms of overall assumptions—to reinforcing the bourgeois 'reality' that the Surrealists committed themselves explicitly to smashing, a project from which their techniques cannot be detached for other, less subversive, uses.

The treatment of eroticism—hence the definition of the couple—in *Sunrise* and *L'Atalante* relates closely to the conflict between the Expressionist and Surrealist attitudes to the unconscious and, beyond that, to still warring tendencies within culture. Marriage in *Sunrise* is essentially built on the repression of the erotic. The film makes a few half-hearted attempts to re-eroticize the couple's relationship after the symbolic remarriage (the secret kiss at the photographer's, the peasant dance, the wife's response during the return boat journey to the dancers glimpsed around a bonfire), but all these are safely contained within the notion of a return to



Janet Gaynor's spiritual strength in *Sunrise*.

'childlike' innocence (which is of course totally to misconceive the innocence of children as well as of adults). In *L'Atalante*, on the other hand, the marriage itself is founded upon the strong and marvellously communicated charge of eroticism between the couple: unlike the City Woman, Père Jules and the peddler do not represent exclusively, or even primarily, erotic threats (though they may be seen as suggesting the possibility of a less circumscribed eroticism). One might compare, as epitomizing the contrast, the scene in the marshes in *Sunrise* with the scene in *L'Atalante* already cited, where the lovers express their longing for each other when separated. Murnau's imagery associates eroticism with night, fog, mud and murder; Vigo's (the bodies covered in little shadow-spots, an hallucinatory suggestion of an unendurable skin-irritation which could be purged only by sexual union) triumphantly vindicates the erotic as the source of life, energy and fulfilment.

The opposition must immediately be qualified by a striking plot-dissimilarity: the marsh scene in *Sunrise* is a scene of adulterous love-making, whereas in the scene of erotic longing in *L'Atalante* the separated lovers are husband and wife. This serves on one level only to strengthen my point: there is no husband/wife scene in *Sunrise* that has anything approaching a comparable erotic charge, the implication being that eroticism itself is unclean. On another level, the fact that in *L'Atalante* eroticism is validated by marriage does produce problems, or point to limitations, inherent in the film's project and its realization. In terms of structure, the scene in *L'Atalante* that parallels the marsh scene is that between Juliette and le Père Jules in the latter's cabin: a comparison more complex than the one I have dealt with, and one to which I shall return.

It becomes necessary at this point to introduce a digression, but one that will lead, eventually, right back to the heart of *L'Atalante*. Much work has been devoted in recent years (initiated by Metz in *Film Language*) to developing the notion of film as discourse; the (wholly admirable) aim being to dismantle the ideological impositions of 'Realism.' If a film is a 'discourse' (i.e., emanating from a specific and definable source), it can no longer be a 'window on the world,' giving access to a universal/eternal 'truth' of 'reality.' The question instantly arises, 'Whose discourse?'—to which *auteur* theory (supported by traditional aesthetics) had prematurely proposed a simple answer. No one, I take it, would today attribute a filmic text to a single unmediated authorial 'voice' (though one might wish to argue that the individual presence is often—in distinguished art always—crucial to defining its specificity). The individual discourse is necessarily contained within and complexly determined by (even while it may subvert) a wider discourse, the discourse of the culture. In *our* culture, the dominant discourse can only be that of patriarchal bourgeois capitalism. This does not mean that all texts are in any sense interchangeable, that all merely reiterate the same discourse. A culture has many voices, frequently speaking in opposition to each other, arguing both within and against the dominant discourse. One can imagine two poles: to the left, films whose relation to the dominant discourse is purely oppositional, that have totally purged themselves of all contamination by it; to the right films that limply reiterate it, without producing any disturbances or contradictions. Both poles must be understood as more 'Platonic' than real: I don't know of any films that would fully correspond to either, and don't believe such films exist. The concept, however, allows us to envisage all actual films as existing on a continuum between the poles.

I want to focus here on the term 'patriarchal.' The cinema

has been from the first, and is still, an overwhelmingly male-dominated institution (like all the major institutions of our culture). Its dominant discourse is consequently a male discourse; more precisely, a patriarchal discourse, the discourse of the symbolic Father. The mechanisms of this discourse can be analysed in the general movement of 'classical' narrative. The text begins by establishing an order; the order is then disturbed, threatened, even destroyed, the disturbance (dramatized as specific character—or relationship—conflicts) generally constituting the major part of the fiction; finally, order is restored—the initial order, or the initial order improved and strengthened, or (much less frequently) a new order. The order is of course patriarchal: organized in relation to the dominance of the heterosexual male, and usually embodied in marriage and family (think how many films culminate in lines like 'I'll take you home now,' 'We can go home now,' 'Let's go home' . . . always, of course, spoken by the male).

Sunrise and *L'Atalante* both exemplify this structure very clearly. The essential difference is that in *Sunrise* the narrative movement and its resolution are presented as entirely unproblematic, with great show of conviction and weight of art. When the film opens, the initial order has already been disturbed, but we are given its essence in a brief, one-shot, flashback, when the elderly nurse/mother-figure talks of the couple's past ('They were like children . . .': the ploughing scene). The City Woman (or the return of repressed libido) creates the disturbance, and is finally eliminated from the narrative. Though in certain ways the structure of *Sunrise* is extremely unsatisfactory, one can argue for the ideological necessity of the last part. Throughout, the husband is presented as weak and helpless. The wife, on the other hand, is given great *spiritual* strength (in her role as saviour: a common strategy of male dominance, that at once 'ennobles' her, denies her sexuality, and places her in the service of the man). The final section of the film emphasizes the wife's *physical* helplessness: the female saviour needs male protection. Her life is saved by (a) her husband's presence of mind in binding her to the rushes and (b) the wise village elder who 'knows the tides,' and raises her unconscious body into his arms and boat just as she is about to drown. Meanwhile, the husband almost strangles the City Woman, to express his repudiation of everything that cannot be safely contained within marriage-and-family. His physical strength (supported by despair and outrage) compensates for his earlier moral weakness. The order restored at the end depends upon the City Woman's dismissal/withdrawal, from the village and from the narrative. If we ask what the future holds for the husband—besides ploughing his field and tossing his baby in the air—the film overwhelms the question with its fusion of Nature and Religion (the sunrise, the Holy Family). As for what the future holds for the wife, the film at no point permits us to ask such a question: she is there to serve the male.

In general terms, if we approach classical cinema from a Feminist perspective, we shall be concerned with examining the roles *assigned* to women rather than *chosen* by women. But this does not totally preclude the possibility of a woman's discourse creating an intervention (and perhaps disruption) within the dominant patriarchal discourse. A privileged focus for an exploration of such a possibility has been (very appropriately) the work of women film-makers such as Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. And, although not obvious at the time, the findings of such an exploration seem in retrospect *very* obvious: that women film-makers, working within a patriarchal system, permitted certain licenses *as* women (i.e. freaks), and surreptitiously adopting certain subversive

strategies (whether consciously or not), have been able to produce fragmented texts, in which male dominance is ironically foregrounded, but no coherent body of work. (In the post-classical phase of Hollywood, the erratic careers of Claudia Weill and Joan Micklin Silver—both of whom have made admirable movies under extremely difficult conditions—merely extend and confirm this diagnosis). The alternative has been for women to work outside the mainstream (whether Hollywood or European: the trendy effusions of Agnès Varda have little bearing on the issue). I think especially of Chantal Akerman, whose *Jeanne Dielman, 23 rue de Commerce, Bruxelles* is as accessible as any Bergman movie (and more intelligent than most Bergman movies), yet has received only the most limited distribution.

The question I wish to raise is of the possibility of a woman's discourse asserting itself—to whatever degree—within a man's film; the overall project will always, necessarily, be one of *placing*, of subordination. Can anything of a 'woman's discourse' qualify or subvert this?

In *Sunrise* the women are entirely subordinate to the man: they exist only in relation to him. Juliette is the centre of *L'Atalante*. While the film's narrative has so much in common with that of *Sunrise*, in one crucial respect it inverts it: here, the transgressor is the wife. Relative to the women in *Sunrise*, Juliette is allowed considerable autonomy. During the rare moments in Murnau's film where either woman is shown without the man, she is exclusively preoccupied with him: the wife, abandoned, grieves over the soup, the City Woman, awaiting the man's return from the supposedly murderous excursion, busies herself marking newspaper advertisements for farmers to move to the city. Juliette, on the contrary, is shown repeatedly alone or in the company of outsiders, beginning with her moments of solitude on the barge in her bridal dress, already filled with doubts, questioning the marriage. She is allowed interests of her own (albeit 'feminine' ones—Paris fashions, etc.) and a lively curiosity about and delight in things (the cabin scene). Her desires are not bound by the marriage—at least, not until about two-thirds of the way through the film.

The central impulse in all Vigo's work is the impulse towards liberation. His first short, *A Propos de Nice*, already combined Marxist, Surrealist and Freudian thrusts in its attack on the complacent bourgeoisie; *Zéro de Conduite* culminates in a successful revolution. The subject of *L'Atalante* was not of Vigo's own choosing, but a substitute for projects he couldn't get financed. Far from diminishing the film's interest, this actually in some respects enhances it, though it may of course account for its ultimate unsatisfactoriness: the partial recalcitrance of the material foregrounds problems (of narrative, and beyond that of human relationships) that are absolutely central to our culture. Vigo's Surrealist derivation and commitment to liberation are here brought to bear on the theme of marriage—the social institution through which the oppression of women is legalized, ratified and reinforced. The film tries to achieve an equal balance of interest between the husband and the wife. If Juliette moves to its centre, that is because she constitutes its problem.

The 'order' tentatively presented at the beginning of *L'Atalante* is immediately established in an ambiguous relationship to the dominant orthodoxy. It is important that we are introduced to le Père Jules and his youthful sidekick *before* we are introduced to the bride and groom: Vigo is more interested in celebrating the forces of disruption than in analysing the forces of conformity. The opening images introduce (a) the barge, (b) industry/commerce (the smoke of a goods train that obliterates the barge), and (c) the church (pillar of the rural community from which Juliette comes). The greater

part of the film is concerned with exploring life on the barge—its joys and tensions—seeing there the possibility of an alternative community, an existence relatively untrammelled by the constrictions of established society: a tentative, embryonic version, one might say, of Marcuse's non-surplus-repressive civilisation, in which work and play, if not identical, move freely and easily into one another, and in which relationships are at least *potentially* released from the constraints of bourgeois morality with its rigid roles and rules. On the other hand, the film acknowledges, both implicitly and at moments explicitly, the barge's necessary ties to capitalist enterprise and to traditional values. If the barge is presented as an escape, not only from a paralysing rural respectability, but also from the horrors of a dehumanized urban proletariat—from both country and city—it is also shown to be dependent upon the commerce between the two.

The procession that follows Jean and Juliette from the church is presented—despite the jolly music from a group of village players—more in terms of a funeral than a wedding. On one level, the community is mourning the loss of Juliette. On another, the *mise-en-scène* connects marriage itself with mourning and the repression of impulse. The procession—with everyone dressed in black—consists almost exclusively of couples; the only exception, the man who makes a pass at the woman in front of him, is the only one who shows any spontaneity, and his levity is instantly rebuked. The film's very starting-point establishes its central contradiction: it wants to celebrate the barge life as a freer alternative to established society, without abandoning the marriage union that is the latter's pillar. To put it another way (with Vigo's commitment to Surrealism and the erotic always in mind) one might describe the film as an attempt to reconcile *l'amour fou* with domesticity.

Just as the female archetypes of *Sunrise* are by no means exclusive to Expressionism, so the narrative premise of *L'Atalante* far transcends any boundaries of movement or nationality. Many films have established their essential problematic by opening with a wedding and the removal of the bride from the 'safe' bounds of a known milieu: one might adduce Ford's splendid, underestimated *Drums Along the Mohawk*, not only for its closely parallel action (secure society, grieving relatives, bride taken away to an altogether more primitive cultural situation to which she must learn to adapt), but because it evokes that peculiarly American genre the Western, and a world and ethos as far removed as possible from French Surrealism. What the comparison points to is the strength and 'universality' (again, within western culture) of assumptions about male and female roles: man as adventurer/wanderer, woman as settler/domesticator. The specific cultural/generic context of *Drums* makes it possible for Ford to present his Lana (Claudette Colbert) as largely unproblematic: she has a vital role within a new, developing community, which she both enhances and is enhanced by. The sexual problematic of *L'Atalante* is closer, in fact, to that of many Hawks films: the introduction of a woman into a hitherto all-male 'outsider' group which already thrived without her and which seems to offer her no obvious or essential place. Yet Hawks consistently evaded the problem of *marriage*: his films end with a heterosexual union whose permanency is never guaranteed, and the word 'marriage' is never mentioned. The great interest of *L'Atalante* lies in its raising of problems that the cinema has usually side-stepped; one scarcely has the right to demand that it also solve them.

In the first half of the film, le Père Jules is crucial to the (dramatic, thematic, ideological) testing of the marriage. Structurally, he corresponds to the City Woman in *Sunrise* (the external force that threatens the marriage by tempting

one of the partners); the conception is as different as one can imagine, the final measure of the difference between the two films. Michel Simon's Jules relates clearly enough to his Boudu, in Renoir's admirable film of two years earlier (1932): both are associated with animals (Boudu with his dog, Jules with his fecundly proliferating cats); both resist bourgeois cleanliness, bourgeois etiquette, and bourgeois morality; both are associated with freedom (Boudu specifically with nature—especially in the film's closing minutes—Jules with travel, the sea, foreign places); both intervene (temporarily) in a marriage. Yet not only the characterization but, more important, the *function* within the total text, is subtly different in the two films, and the difference defines what separates Vigo from Renoir, for all their areas of compatibility. Boudu often (and Jules never) resembles an overgrown, rather cuddly child, pre-socialized and pre-sexual (or at least pre-phallic): he has never kissed anyone but his dog, and when he suddenly becomes Mme. Lestingois' enthusiastic and potent lover the audience is as surprised as she is. Jules' sexuality, on the other hand, is never in the least ambiguous (at least as regards potency and experience). Boudu's intrusion into the Lestingois household never poses a serious threat to it. The affectionate/comic-satirical tone makes it possible for Renoir (and the viewer) not to take the constraints, repressions and frustrations of the Lestingois marriage very seriously (indeed, the film's charm depends on that). If there is little sense that Boudu might genuinely liberate the Lestingois, that is because Renoir cannot quite bring himself to believe that they really need it. The ending suggests that it is a pity that Boudu can't be incorporated in the household, but that it will nevertheless continue without much harm done. Boudu, simultaneously, becomes translated to a symbolic level (the spirit of freedom, the spirit of Nature): the implication seems to be that he represents something inextinguishable which—suitably tamed and modified—will somehow inform all.

What, in Vigo's film, does le Père Jules actually represent? With the cabin scene specifically in mind, one can list the major components:

1. Living at ease with 'dirt.' Juliette's initial attempt to establish a role for herself on the barge took the form of playing the good bourgeois housewife and doing the washing, with Jules reluctantly relinquishing his underwear. The film offers no sense that this accomplishes anything very beneficial. Jules is presented as perfectly robust, healthy and happy; the 'dirt' amid which he lives suggests his ability to embrace without squeamishness the basic physical conditions of existence: he can't understand Juliette's disgust that one of his cats has given birth to kittens in her bed (his reaction being to disclaim paternity). Freud links the obsession with cleanliness (especially among bourgeois housewives) with sexual repression, both of one's self and of others (a perception marvellously developed by Ophüls in *The Reckless Moment*). Jules' ease with 'dirt' represents a direct affront to Protestant bourgeois values, where 'cleanliness is next to godliness.' ('Godliness' was summarily dealt with at the film's outset, in the wonderful moment when Jules dashes back into the church, splashes himself with holy water, and pronounces the couple man and wife.) In fact, Jules never appears unsanitary: when he removes his clothes to show Juliette his tattoos, his body looks firm, clean and healthy.

2. Blood and pain. In order to demonstrate to Juliette the use of a native knife, Jules casually slices open his hand and licks the blood, showing no response to Juliette's exclamations that he has hurt himself or to her offers of bandages. There is nothing remotely masochistic about the action, nor does it

reflect any animus against the human body: quite the reverse. Jules' ease with physicality can embrace the realities of blood and pain without flinching: what's a cut here or there? Similarly with the jar of pickled hands: there is no trace of morbidity in Jules' attitude to this souvenir of his friend. On the contrary, it implies a thoroughly healthy, accepting attitude to death. The film at no point suggests that Jules lingers morbidly over his memento, or uses it as some kind of fetish: the friend was part of his life, and now that he's dead his hands are part of the décor.

3. Playing with patriarchy. I recently listened on the radio to a concert conducted by Margaret Hawkins which included the finest performance I have heard or hope to hear of Beethoven's C major Mass; I had never heard of Ms. Hawkins before, and assume she will remain buried away in Milwaukee (where the concert came from). The point of this (almost) totally irrelevant observation is to establish the fact that the orchestral conductor is one of the most zealously guarded of all patriarchal roles: women can sing or play *under* a conductor, but if they insist on conducting, and conducting *men*, they will have to stay in Milwaukee. In the cabin, Jules produces a battered and shabby conductor-puppet and, hiding behind him, has him wave his arms; Juliette responds by 'performing' with a mechanical musical toy. The charm of the scene lies in its reduction of an archetypal image of patriarchal dominance to play and parody: it is the moment where Jules and Juliette begin to relax with each other and communicate warmly, in a spirit of fun.

4. Property. Jean, seeing how attracted Juliette is to the values Jules represents, denounces Jules' collection of 'junk' and proceeds to smash everything in sight. Jules, returning, shorn, from his visit to the dog-barber, finds one intact plate and smashes it on the floor, remarking 'he missed that one.' This is probably the incident John Smith* has in mind when he praises Jules' 'resilience'; it might have led him to reconsider his remark about the 'sordid decadence' of Jules' mementoes. What the moment makes clear is that Jules doesn't depend on 'things' for his sense of identity: his 'junk' is readily expendable, he can lose it and still remain himself. He is an affront to the whole capitalist emphasis on ownership and private property. His affection for all the curiosities he has accumulated is plain; but he can as easily live without them.

5. Free sexuality and unattachment. Juliette looks at a photograph of Jules with two women. 'There's a story behind that,' he tells her. We never hear it, but our imagination is left free to speculate. Jules' commitment to people and to relationships (his friend with the hands, Jean, the boy, Juliette) is obvious, but it is never exclusive. The film presents him consistently as a happily unmarried man, able to respond to people freely and generously. Because he is not possessed, he is not possessive. His openness and generosity contrast markedly with the mean-minded anger of Jean, whose insecurity (characteristic of the heterosexual male within patriarchy) expresses itself in his fear of losing control over the woman when he sees her responding to anything outside this sphere of authority. Any suggestion that Jules' sexual freedom exploits women is countered by the later delightful scene with the fortune-teller, where it is the woman who takes the sexual initiative, Jules enthusiastically following her lead. There are also possible overtones of bisexuality: whether Jules' commitment to his dead friend (not to mention the boy who shares his cabin) had sexual connotations is something

*John Smith's book *Jean Vigo* (Studio Vista, 1972) contains a detailed analysis of *L'Atalante* that tells us more about bourgeois values and bourgeois squeamishness than about Vigo's film.





OPPOSITE: Michel Simon's Père Jules, a liberating force in **L'Atalante**. ABOVE: A return to innocent love in **Sunrise** (1927). BELOW: **L'Atalante**: Juliette's 'temptation' in the tavern.



the cinema in 1934 couldn't tell us (though Vigo's film doesn't say a word against it).

Just what *are* we to make of Jean's brutal intervention? My feelings of disgust and outrage may be just as subjective as John Smith's endorsement of it. It is clear that what le Père Jules offers Juliette is not some sordid (and ideologically recuperable) adultery, but liberation: he embodies quite a catalogue of affronts to patriarchal capitalism, not the least of which is his total rejection of the principle of possession (whether of objects or persons). It is precisely the right of possession that Jean's anger seeks to assert—specifically, the husband's right to possess the wife. Seen in retrospect, the film raises vividly the increasingly vital issue of the incompatibility of women's liberation with marriage (at least as that institution is understood and practised within our culture). It is not only Jean who can't cope with le Père Jules without recourse to violence—the film can't either. Very few people in my experience (perhaps only John Smith) find the second half of *L'Atalante* satisfying; most feel cheated by it. It seems, however, irrelevant to blame Vigo for this. My own impulse, on the contrary, is to celebrate him for producing problems and tensions that can't be encompassed (without cheating) within the constraints of classical narrative. The liberation that Juliette glimpses, and that so appalls Jean, has to be denied in the interests of narrative closure and the restoration of order.

The film adopts two strategies to bring this about: the substitution of the peddler for le Père Jules, and the corresponding reduction and partial transformation of Jules himself.

1. The scene in the tavern (the 'Four Nations') makes the act of substitution abundantly clear, for it reproduces the entire pattern of the cabin scene: the arousal of Juliette's curiosity, her openness to experience and desire for things beyond the barge and the marriage; the possibility of freedom, including sexual freedom; 'temptation' and transgression, followed by the husband's angry re-assertion of marital 'rights'—his jealousy, possessiveness, need to establish authority, again presented as the result of male insecurity. But the peddler is not le Père Jules; or, more precisely, he offers what Jules offers, *reduced to recuperable form*. He is a trickster (his conjuring tricks); he actually describes himself as a 'peddler of dreams'; the liberation he represents is only pseudo-liberation, a matter of fantasy and deceit, easily exposed and repudiated. He promises Juliette the delights of the city, and the city proves to be (at least for an isolated woman) a kind of hell.

2. As for Jules, after the cabin scene he is strikingly diminished in the film, both as a subversive force and as a leading character (classical narrative has its place for Jules, after all: comic relief). What is far more distressing, however, is his transformation into an agent of repression: 'Le Père' Jules becomes the symbolic Father. Two images (neither noticed by John Smith) seem particularly significant: (a) Jules, finding Juliette in the music shop, slings her over his shoulder and carries her out, without so much as a 'by-your-leave' (anticipating Mitchum's treatment of Monroe at the end of *River of No Return*—one of Hollywood's archetypal sexist resolutions). (b) Having delivered her home (to the barge), Jules deposits her in Jean's cabin and closes the hatch over her—the woman finally shut away in her husband- and father-created prison. Of course, Juliette wants this (just as Monroe 'wants' Mitchum to come and carry her away): what else could the narrative possibly say? This is followed by the famous last shot: the celebratory image of the phallic barge pushing on down the canal. Somehow, in 1987, celebrations seem less in order.

The second half of *L'Atalante* contains some crucial scenes (one certainly does not wish to write it off): Juliette in the city discovering the ignominious reality of the position of women in capitalist society (the all-male employment lines which she realizes there is no point in her joining); the ugliness of capitalist oppression and victimization (the thief who steals Juliette's purse and becomes the pathetic scapegoat of the dissatisfied mob); the revelation (when Jules visits the company boss to cover up Jean's failures) that the apparently carefree barge life depends on capitalist enterprise. What is most interesting of all (and most undermining of the film's overall project, the celebration of marriage) is the evidence that, while Juliette is beaten down by external, material circumstances, Jean is beaten down simply by the humiliating (to the male ego) loss of 'his' woman. Finally, however, the film's finest impulses are defeated by the constraints of classical narrative: order must be restored and that order is patriarchal.

Behind the failure of *L'Atalante* lies the failure of Surrealism: its failure to grapple with social issues (the class struggle), its failure—for all its commitment to liberation—to acknowledge the oppression of women and develop a Feminist theory. What is remarkable about the film is how close it comes to transcending the boundaries, both of the Surrealist movement, and of the traditional 'realist' aesthetic it opposed. □

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ALL THAT LOVIN' STUFF: Sexuality and Sexual Representation in Some Recent Films By Women

by Kay Armatage

"There is no such thing as sexuality; what we have experienced and are experiencing is the fabrication of a 'sexuality,' the construction of something called 'sexuality' through a set of representations—images, discourses, ways of picturing and describing—that propose and confirm, that make up this sexuality to which we are then referred and held in our lives, a whole *sexual fix* precisely."

STEPHEN HEATH,
THE SEXUAL FIX, 1983

AT THE 1987 MONTREAL Women's Film and Video Festival, *Frauen und Film* editor Gertrude Koch gave a seminar on sexual representation in women's cinema. She outlined a number of approaches ranging from the celebration of traditional and new symbolic representations of female anatomy to stylized treatments of female dominance. Touching on a number of theoretical positions, she emphasized the importance of a feminine alternative to conventional sexual representation in classic cinema as well as the risk of essentialism. She showed a videotape featuring a female torso (nipples offscreen) which, through the magic of video effects, split apart to

reveal images of nature, waterfalls and the like. In the discussion which followed her presentation, Berenice Reynaud added another category, that of the impossibility of representing feminine sexuality in cinema, citing Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women* (USA, 1984) as a film in which the woman's body is virtually excised as a site of representation. Other audience members moved rapidly to the topic of pornography as a masculine regime, which Koch countered by citing international movements of women pornographers, notably in Holland, Germany, and the US.¹

The gist of the Koch discussion was the opposite of Heath's statement above. Women filmmakers seem to be asserting the existence of a feminine sexuality which has hitherto remained unrepresented, which is struggling towards representation in difference.

What follows is a rather random review of some recent films by women, all of which have broached the representation of "all that lovin' stuff."²

Diane Kurys' *L'Homme Amoureux* (France, 1987) enjoyed a wide release this summer, touted as a mainstream art film in which sexual relations were pres-



Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987).



Nina Menkes' *Magdalena Viraga* (1986).

ented from a woman's point of view. Although the sex scenes between Peter Coyote and Greta Scaachi certainly present a contrast to the conventional humping man on top with trousers on, the main appeal of the film seemed to be a lot of kissing with an attractive man (Coyote, in the vainest performance I've seen in years). Oh yes, and a couple of alternative positions—notably the popular up-against-the-wall-with-twirling which increasingly seems to signify the height of reciprocal passion.³

The "difference" of the sexual relations in Kurys' film seems to be constituted not so much in degree of passion or emphasis on kisses, for in the history of cinema there are many memorable kisses from Valentino to Cary Grant.⁴ Rather, the "difference" of *L'Homme Amoureux* seems to reside in the startling assumption of its title: that the fact of the man being in love, being obsessed and troubled by his desire, is the site of the rupture of convention. Kurys seems to be trading here on fairly well-worn clichés about male and female sexuality, notably woman as site of emotional love contrasting with rapacious male physicality—a cliché which in the film is not reversed but "equalized" in reciprocal emotional/physical passion.

Doris Dorrie's *Paradise* (W. Germany, 1986) takes a related inversion quite a bit farther. Here the hapless man is consumed and destroyed by his obsessive desire for the strange, amoral woman who would be perfectly happy in simple lust—another cliché, to be sure, but a rather more interesting one in an age of feminist social purity. The lurid combination of the red-lights of the sex trade district and votive lights

around the shrine in her room is a compatible setting for the prayers-and-curses psychology of the enchantingly lumpen Katharina Thalbach, and the efforts of the 'man in love' to rescue her from depravity serve only to drive all three characters further into spiralling reversals, mayhem, and murder. It is an apocalyptic vision of a sexual "paradise" which turns to hell because the characters base their actions on conventional and complacent assumptions and expectations of desire, love, morality and relationships, and none of those assumptions proves out. The film also shakes up some spectatorial expectations, beginning as a brittle social comedy, a simple reversal of Dorrie's immensely popular *Men* (W. Germany, 1985), but soon breaking apart, shifting style, tone, narrative direction and aesthetic boundaries for a darkly obsessive un-pleasure.

Nina Menkes' *Magdalena Viraga* (USA, 1986) treats her prostitute protagonist's view of male sexuality with a Dworkinesque fury: "I am never angry enough to die. I am angry enough to kill." Menkes calls not only on the writings of Mary Daly, Anne Sexton and Gertrude Stein, but on the cinematic conventions of the cine-feminist avant-garde of the last decade. She employs a stylized dialogue which quotes evocatively from Stein ("Look at me now and here I am"; "they were two sisters who were not sisters") and which is delivered in an enddistanced, uninflected voice-off reminiscent of Mulvey/Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* and Jan Worth's *Taking A Part* and *Doll's Eye*. The long, static plan-sequences are remarkable in the murky widescreens of the two women sit-

ting together in the red light of the hotel, and even more painfully obsessive in the repeated close-ups in the sex scenes. These are the crucial scenes, not only for this discussion but for the film as well, for these static C-U's, held for what seems like minutes at a time and repeated nine times in the film, are the central moments of the film's thesis about heterosexuality and provide the basis for the institutional assumptions about the crime for which Ida⁵ is imprisoned. In these scenes, each with a different anonymous man whose shoulders and back-of-head only are visible, Ida's blank gaze never intersects with the camera's as she is jostled rhythmically back and forth by the passionless humping. In this bleak vision, we find neither Diane Kurys' romantic reciprocity of love and physical passion nor Doris Dorrie's apocalyptic reversal of the emotional economy of heterosexual libido. Surprisingly, neither do we find the alternative to Menkes' miserable heterosexuality which can be found in the writings of Gertrude Stein. In Stein's texts, it is well known, the idiosyncratic syntax and sometimes incomprehensible use of names and nouns not only perform radical literary experiments, but also construct a discourse of codes and ciphers which allowed Stein to celebrate lesbian passions in a time when such relations were either unspoken, pornographic, or represented tragically (as in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, 1928). Stein's "As A Wife Has A Cow: A Love Story" is only incomprehensible until one knows that "cow" was Stein's pet term or code for "vulva," at which point the meditation becomes a graphically erotic celebration of female anatomy and lesbian sexual relations. Stein's "two sisters who are not sisters" takes on a charge of nurturance, power and passion which—although disguised—is not suppressed in her texts. Menkes' "two sisters who are not sisters" find some kind of sustenance in each other's company, for they are sisters under a heterosexual economy of female oppression as well as blood sisters (spilled menstrual blood, the bloody marks of violent revenge, and finally the blood of the martyr), but their potential erotic release from heterosexual oppression is radically suppressed in Menkes' text. That suppression is marked by the grainy texture of the available-light wide-shots as well as by the physical isolation of the women: they sit side by side, neither touching nor looking at each other; their dialogue—"never let me be what he said"—becomes overlapping monologues as both repeat the line over and over in rhythmic syncopa-

tion, their isolation reinforced by abstraction.

Female sexuality then is defined in absence: "Pussy is just pussy as far as I know." There is no female libidinal economy possible within the dominant heterosexist order. Clearly, however, feminist identity is not only possible within that order, but it is defined by its difference from and isolation within heterosexism: "my female self is that private thing locked up inside, inside myself." The film offers a range of female identities: whore, witch, angel, mother, martyr, murderer. These identities are all presented with a Mary Daly-ish writing across traditional conceptions, but a redefinition of a specifically erotic femininity is not among them.

By contrast, in Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Canada, 1987) we find a truly Edenic vision of lesbian sexuality. The protagonist is a young, awkward, grungy and more or less beautiful naif who has innocent dreams of flying and who delights in unself-conscious voyeurism, hero worship, and art for art's sake. Her sexual awakening dawns very gradually, and is conflated with a hard-won understanding of art and the art-world as symbolic spectacle and internecine economy. The interweaving of art as passionate activity, economy and spectacle with sexuality and the process of achieving identity is the core of the film. The pivotal visual object of the movement of narrative, signifying system, and sexual identity is a sculpture in the form of a female body, the head of which is replaced by a rotating video camera. The "woman's look" is thus technological, aesthetic, knowledge producing, and functional in the protagonist's self-revelation. Stolen and installed in her home, it becomes the means by which she tells the tale, producing the narrative of the film as well as her own subjectivity. Her discovery, effected also by the video sculpture, of the lesbian relationship of her employer and the young artist, a sexual relation in turn imbricated in the production of art and the perpetration of an art fraud, is the moment which frees up not only her own sexual awareness but her creative commitment as well.

Sexuality, its representation, and aesthetic representation per se are thus dealt with in one clever conceit. This conceit is eclipsed only by that of the ending of the film—the final, really final ending. Polly is about to show the two other women "lots more" of her photographs. She opens a door in her miserable flat, and magically, they enter, hand in hand, a golden, sun-dappled forest, a

paradisaical bower of egalitarian bliss. Polly turns and smiles at the camera. The movement is thus through representation to a vision of feminine sexuality in full possession of its own knowledge.

Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (USA, 1987) is the closest we come this year to a sophisticated understanding of the multiple forms of female sexuality, heterosexual and lesbian. McLaughlin is something of an icon of the darker side of female sexuality. In Monika Treut/Elfi Mikesch's *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* (W. Germany, 1984) she played Justine, the passive, *saftig* blonde who was subdued and humiliated by the svelte, dark dominatrix of the title. In Mikesch's *Hyena's Breakfast* (W. Germany, 1983) she acted out another sado-masochistic fantasy, flogging herself with whips and cladding herself in a variety of fetishistic paraphernalia as an anonymous man secretly peered through the doorway. In her own *Committed* (USA, 1983), she played Frances Farmer, victim of her own sexual desires, her mother, the Hollywood star system, political intrigue, and finally the grotesque punishments of '50s institutional psychiatry. In all of these films, the overtly sado-masochistic sexuality is played out through strategically stylized narrative and cinematic forms which partake of avant-garde conventions.

She Must Be Seeing Things offers a striking combination of the formulaic conventions of commercial cinema in the principal narrative (continuity editing, economically developed parallel narratives, glossy lighting, mood-enhancing music, fast-paced cutting) and elements of the avant-garde in the film-within-the-film (fragmented narrative, monumental and symbolic expressionistic settings, chiaroscuro lighting, the surrealistic kinkiness of little girls in white nightgowns, disciplinary nuns, rapacious priests, and all sorts of Deren-esque Freudianism). These conventions are deployed in the service of a narrative which deals with sexual fantasy, paranoia and desire, and which finds time along the way for masquerade, performance, cross-dressing, black stockings, bondage, judy dolls, up-against-the-wall-twirling, role-playing, and old-fashioned giggling hand-holding. All of the representations of sexuality, straight and gay, are energetic and steamy and somehow good-hearted for that. Even the well-drawn social critiques (the drunken heterosexual seduction/capitulation and the hilarious sex shop scene) are carried out without the distortions

of bitter defeatism or cynical archness.

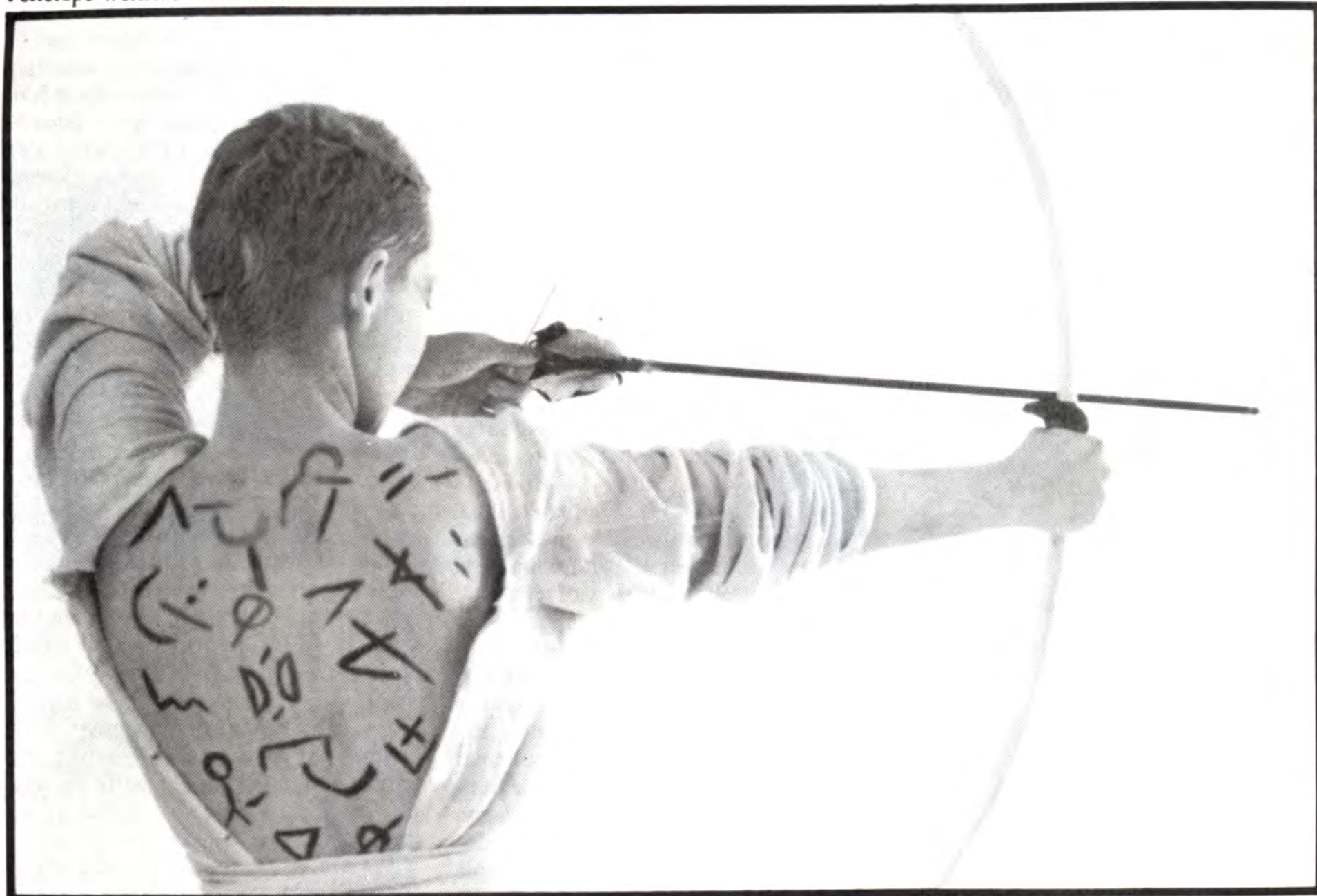
Heath: "It is not that the Victorians, as is so often said, repress the topic of sexuality; it is, on the contrary, that they produce it, that with them the sexual becomes a problem which thus needs to be faced" (*The Sexual Fix*, 1983). For the women of *She Must Be Seeing Things*, "the sexual" is a vector of immense energy which can make trouble when combined with a volatile emotion like jealousy, but the relational problem produced by paranoid sexual fantasy can be resolved by a willfully positivist personal decision. Sexuality itself, in all its myriad forms, is not the problem. Neither is its representation, for a variety of formal strategies can be and are enlisted with a sophisticated and easy-going assurance.

The representation of sexuality as a topic for discussion is widely current these days, from Heath to Koch, from *Newsweek* (24 Aug. 1987) to *Jump-Cut* (#32), to mention only those few which have grazed my view in the past few months. From most of these discussions, which deal prominently with commercial films by men, women and female sexuality don't seem to be well off. In films by women, however, we find a somewhat different movement.

We are, as far as I can read history, the only generation of women who has enjoyed sexual freedom in any measure. In films by men and some by women, the signs of the struggle over sexuality are still very much with us. But in women's cinema, in fictional representations at least, so are the signs of its joyful attainment. □

FOOTNOTES

1. Basically, from the evidence of *Jump-Cut* #32 at least, pornography is "feminized" by the fleshing out of narrative—an interesting twist on feminist film theory of the last decade.
2. "I'm hoping for someone who'll like me for my own self, aside from all that lovin' stuff"—Marilyn Monroe, *Bus Stop*.
3. Ironically—in this context—the nadir/zenith of such scenes must be the complexly problematic embrace in Brian de Palma's *Obsession*, in which the camera swirls in delirious 360 degree arcs around the rotating heterosexual/incestuous couple.
4. Betty Ferguson's *Kisses* (Canada, 1976) is a great pre-semiotic compendium of the conventions of the exchange of lips in classic cinema. Available from the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, 416-593-1808.
5. Ida, the protagonist, is named after Gertrude Stein's novel *Ida*.



WHIPPING IT UP:

Gay Sex in Film and Video

by **Bryan Bruce**

Homosexuality shocks less, but continues to be interesting; it is still at that stage of excitement where it provokes what might be called feats of discourse. Speaking of homosexuality permits those who "aren't" to show how open, liberal and modern they are; and those who "are" to bear witness, to assume responsibility, to militate. Everyone gets busy, whipping it up.

ROLAND BARTHES
PREFACE TO *TRICKS*¹

The artistic field has long been claimed by gay men as legitimate territory: in this area the male homosexual has found the means to pass by identifying himself as artistic/romantic rather than simply as gay . . . Alternately, sexual illegality leads to a heightened sensibility about the world . . . This contradiction is the one in which all gay art situates itself

CAROLINE SHELDON
"LESBIANS AND FILM:
SOME THOUGHTS"²

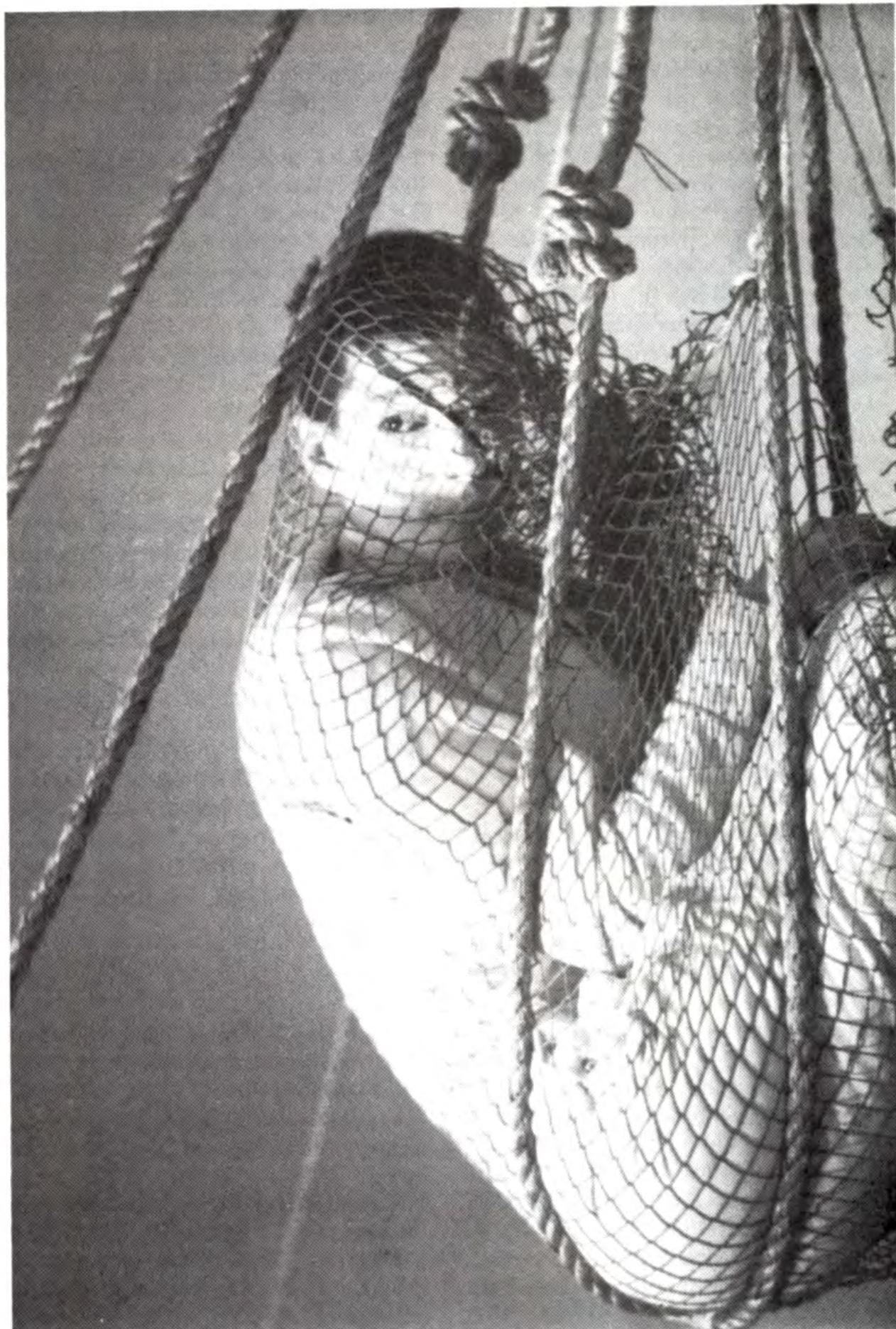
When we used to speak of a gay revolution, we didn't think it would mean 700 leather bars. We never thought too much about alternatives.

ROSA VON PRAUNHEIM
IN HIS FILM *ARMY OF LOVERS/*
REVOLT OF THE PERVERTS

GAY SEX REMAINS, despite attempts by various factions to contain, sublimate, appropriate, outlaw, or annihilate it, a favoured site of sexual curiosity and transgression. Now that the focus of AIDS hysteria has shifted and been diffused amongst the wider

heterosexual community, with the gay male no longer its exclusive scapegoat, homosexuality has become, once more, a legitimate illegitimate activity, but with a decided twist. Rather than take advantage of AIDS as an opportunity to rethink the direction of the gay 'movement' (if such a thing still exists), or to be pushed again, as in the late '60s, to the point of militancy, gays have retreated even further than before to a passive position of aping the heterosexual paradigm and embracing its moral imperatives. To generalize, an increasing number of gay men today are decidedly white (regardless of their race), uptight (read monogamous, conservative), and unabashedly right (wing). It should not be too surprisingly, then, that the recent gay films and videos that I'm about to discuss significantly reflect this stagnation of a once actively revolutionary subculture—not as a straightforward translation of it (for the most part, gay artists are still, at least apparently, situated firmly on the left), but as a failure of the imagination, an apoliticalness, and a nostalgia for the climate of activism of the previous decade.

The three opening quotations invoke the areas I want to concentrate on. Barthes' optimistic assessment of homosexuality as subject matter in art, its 'hip' and outré appeal, suggests to me how easily gay imagery can be appropriated by straight culture, how it can tend to invite the opportunism of the dilettante and the trivialization of gay experience by those who approximate the stance without ever being forced to engage any of its more brutal social and political realities. Caroline Sheldon points further to the contradiction inherent in gay art: the 'legitimacy' of the artist's position (sanctioned by culture and afforded a measure of eccentricity, the gay artist can comfortably remain sexually ambiguous) set against the highly motivated, political project of the sexual 'outlaw.' It also suggests the opposition of that art which remains within the boundaries of conventional cultural expression to the 'illegitimacy' and illegality of pornography, the latter being capable, potentially, of transcending the limitations of art discourse. All of this is relevant to the discussion that follows of the Naked Eye Cinema, a current super-8 movement coming out of New York, and two porno films made in the early '70s by Fred Halsted (*L.A. Plays Itself*, *Sex Garage*) that I saw recently for the first time; a discussion of 'art films' of the '80s and 'blue movies' of the '70s will provide a context for the elaboration of these and other issues. The final quota-



Penelope Wehrli's *In A Storm Even Dinosaurs Trip*.

tion from Berlin film-maker Rosa Van Praunheim expresses the frustration in finding alternatives to the gay culture that has emerged; a brief look at the images presented by *Another World*, a recent screening of videos by five gay men, will demonstrate the various evasions engineered by gays to escape the responsibility of creating a new, more political identity.

Undeniably the Naked Eye Cinema has much in common with the Cinema of Transgression, another super-8 'movement' out of New York, perpetrated almost single-handedly by Nick Zedd;³ both rely on the gritty, documentary realism afforded by the super-8 camera, taking advantage of its un-

washed aesthetic; both use extreme and shocking imagery to irritate and provoke, including explicitly sexual, and sexually deviant, material; both are decidedly of and about the 'New York experience,' expressive of the angst of city living, the 'rat race,' the perpetual underlying threat of violence, cockroaches, and so on. The most striking difference between the two bodies of work is the largely heterosexual (and heterosexualist) impetus behind the 'Transgression' films as against the stronger affinities with gay culture of the Naked Eye. Although by no means exclusively gay, the latter movement consists more adamantly of films by gays and women, and has an over-riding

appeal to subjects that, if not bearing directly on an identification with sexually subversive activity, at least undercut the masculinist posturing on which Zedd has built a reputation. But surprisingly, for reasons I'll go into now, the Naked Eye does not go far enough in distinguishing itself from its more heterosexual counterpart, likewise falling victim to the impoverishment of the New York art 'thing.'

The most obvious limitation of the Naked Eye cinema—and it's a problem that gay art is, sadly, still heavily prone to—is the failure to get beyond camp, or, at the very least, to place it within a more political framework. The only writing on camp I've found that attempts to politicize it is Jack Babuscio's essay "Camp and the gay sensibility,"⁴ which, although useful, already seems dated. Babuscio provides a kind of guide to reading or decoding camp, a means to appropriating the sensibility to a political end by identifying its roots in the oppression of gays as an undesirable minority. He argues that the reality of homosexuals having been forced for so long to pass for straight has become an intrinsic part of the gay consciousness, embodied spontaneously in camp affectation: "This strategy of survival in a hostile world has sensitized us to disguises, impersonations, the significance of surfaces, the need to project personality, the intensities of character, etc."⁵ This perspective does make camp more meaningful than, say, the postulation of a pure gay aesthetic outside of a socio-historical model, based, perhaps, on the presumption of homosexual access to transcendent sensual pleasure, or the lingering fallacy that to be gay is to exhibit naturally an 'artistic disposition,' an unimpeachable taste in interior design, or an almost religious preference for the signifier over the signified. It is important, then, to study the sources of gay oppression and our responses to them in order to identify a gay sensibility (Gore Vidal's pistol notwithstanding⁶) that has been constructed by ideology, not preordained by biology. But the impetus of camp is to conceal, not reveal, this construction, and further, to elevate its concealment to the status of fetish. Freud's notion of fetish is based on denial (its purpose the disavowal of castration), and it is the same dynamic at work here: camp denies its 'political' origins by serving as a diversion or escape from the recognition of what it actually means to be a homosexual in a heterosexual world, that is, to be hated, feared, violated, and beaten into submission. According to Babuscio's theory, camp can almost be

construed as a *celebration* of the victimized position, a dubious pursuit for a sexual minority facing the very real threat of the New Morality. 'Passing for straight' and 'coming out' are, according to Babuscio, the real motivations behind camp excess, but for an increasing number of gays who have always been 'out,' or who have been out long enough to get over it, the sensibility has become anachronistic, and merely indulgent.

I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that the Naked Eye Cinema is predominantly camp in tone, considering the New York avant-garde gay tradition (Warhol, Morrissey, Jack Smith, and so on); it seems to have become an almost indigenous form of cinematic expression. It must be remembered, however, that when films like *Flaming Creatures* or *Chelsea Girls* were hailed in the '60s as innovative works, the kind of 'coming out' phenomenon that Babuscio speaks of was still highly relevant: these films were designed to explode the closet. Even a film like Friedkin's *Boys in the Band* (1970) used camp to this end, functioning within Hollywood at the time as the most transgressive treatment of a strictly taboo subject. Today, of course, the film can be regarded simply, as Vito Russo terms it, as a "homosexual period piece," a product of a very precise historical moment that now seems dated, if still 'charming' or 'amusing.' But to witness current films coming out of the New York avant-garde resorting to the same tactics is an alarming indication of how little gay culture has advanced since that time.

The most startling continuity between the films of the Naked Eye I've seen is the appeal to some notion of excess and decadence, the image of an advanced and crumbling civilization on the verge of apocalypse. Carl George's *The Last 40 Days*, Erotic Psyche's *Mutable Fire*, and Penelope Wehrli's *Invasion of the Amazons (Continued Erosion)* each allude to this kind of 'romantic' myth, incorporating the historical symbols of ancient cultures in a modern, camp context. George's film presents the six-armed shiva and the pyramid as reference points; Wehrli uses ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and, again, the pyramid; Erotic Psyche borrows from the Egyptian motif of Russell's *Altered States*, from the Frankenstein myth, and more generally includes apocalyptic images of falling meteors, demolished buildings, and mushroom clouds. The three films present this kind of material in similar styles: rapid montage, non-linear, associative juxtaposition, and the

constant interjection of shots taken directly from media sources. The impression is of an accelerated wash of overwrought signifiers which, although perhaps intended to evoke the decline of western civilization, come across as an extravagance and indulgence in it, a morbid preoccupation with its intractability; any political inflection or heterodoxy is collapsed into these personal visions of hell on earth.

I want to stress again that not all the films of the Naked Eye movement are by gays, or even engage specific gay content, although, as I've argued, the camp aspect is relatively uniform. But what does emerge from the films, and what will become even more evident in the gay videos, is the dual operation of the apolitical tendency that seems to be prevalent in gay art, and how it is manifested. In *Gays & Film*, Richard Dyer points to those films which "... stress gayness as a personality issue, a problem to which there are only individual solutions."⁷ The Naked Eye films largely conform to this formula, particularly in that many allude to a gay sensibility but insist on having it remain implicit, refusing any representation of concrete social or cultural context. Gayness then becomes categorized only by an expression of personal obsession or style, again, comfortably subsumed by the expected aberrance of the artistic personality. The opposite dynamic to this introjection of gay identity is the tendency to project it onto images outside of and distanced from its immediate expression, appealing to the exotic, the foreign, the fantastic, the mystical, or the historical in order to sustain gayness as 'otherness.' Vito Russo, speaking of Hollywood film, makes the point that "heterosexual society has a vested interest in keeping homosexual relationships untenable and mystical because, made real, they are seen as a threat . . .";⁸ the irony here is that many gay artists and film-makers have adopted the same strategy against themselves as a kind of exemption from the responsibility of engaging a more directly political discourse. This is not to say that 'otherness' cannot be expressed with reference to these categories; I merely contend that the preponderance of said images in gay film and video work, aside from providing a convenient forum for camp antics, belies this escapist attitude. Beyond these considerations, the invocation of spiritualism and mysticism in the avant-garde often operates as a legitimizing factor, the incorporation of an esoteric vocabulary affording the artist the inaccessible pose of the purveyor of an

impenetrable hermeneutic, neatly eschewing accountability. Penelope Wehrli's *Invasion of the Amazons* (*Continued Erosion*) is particularly exemplary of this tendency. The disjointed shots of a woman's body overlaid with various inscriptions (painted hieroglyphics, projected images) intercut with various references to female strength (an archer) and narrative control (the woman typing) are presented as a kind of seductive ritualism that remains, at best, inscrutable (the same quality found in Carl George's *Belle Fleur*, Kembra Pfahler's *Cornella: the story of a burning bush*, and other Naked Eye films). Because the film refuses to extrapolate on, or even articulate, the material it presents, much can be read into it—the erosion of male-centred culture, the creation of a new, feminine symbolic—but, as a friend pointed out, the work ultimately gives the impression of a weak attempt at ascribing feminine écriture to the radical chic of East Village graffiti practice.

The use of camp and otherwise gay male signifiers by several women filmmakers of the Naked Eye Cinema (Penelope Wehrli, Kembra Pfahler) disturbs me; as with the Cassandra Stark 'punk' film *Wrecked on Cannibal Island* (which seems more aligned with the Cinema of Transgression), it is an instance of women adopting the masculine gay or punk 'discourse,' perhaps because both subcultures are dominated by males and adamantly refute a female identity on its own terms. Caroline Sheldon succinctly characterizes the dynamic in gay culture: "the male homosexual may retain the confidence of the power men have, i.e. economically, socially, and culturally, but may additionally derive confidence from relating sexually to *other* men with this power. Unlike the lesbian he is not betraying the respect due to male privilege which he also possesses . . . Even in the negative attitude toward women, often present in gay men's behaviour, there is a basic agreement with patriarchal society."⁹

Kembra Pfahler's *Cowboy Stories: Mild* offers the strange spectacle of a heterosexual female film-maker presenting us with a naked gay cowboy 'clone' in chaps in front of a lavender backdrop parading around a woman in a diaphanous white skirt with bowling balls strapped to her feet as the Leather Nun song "Gimme Gimme Gimme (A Man After Midnight)," the gay American fisting theme, plays on and on; later in the film, we are graced with shots of Marilyn Monroe from *Bus Stop*. You can't get much gayer than this, but the question remains, why bother? A

moratorium should be placed on the image of Marilyn, especially in a gay context: it has become the most severely exhausted signifier of the twentieth century. And as for the gay clone, leather or otherwise, it's hard to imagine a less progressive image for the homosexual community. Adopted, perhaps, in the '70s to dispel the stereotype of the effeminate gay male, or intended, originally, as ironic hyperbole, it is no longer possible in the '80s, with the regeneration of heterosexual machismo, to distinguish between the gay and straight Marlboro Man. Pfahler's film indulges these images for no apparent reason. It also points to a perplexing, if not uncommon, phenomenon: gay culture apes straight culture and is subsequently repossessed by straights in a weird parallax effect in which homosexuality is represented only by its most appropriate elements.

I've taken the Naked Eye Cinema to task for the issues it raises concerning the more unfortunate tendencies of gay art; the movement is not, however, entirely without merit. Carl George's *The Last 40 Days* is of particular interest for its emphatic use of the super-8 idiom. The juxtaposition of the same material shot on film and super-8 (a technique used by several film-makers in the movement) seems highly relevant to the evolution of avant-garde film language, and serves to undercut the somewhat academic distinction that has emerged between the rivalling media. George also manages to turn nasty New York angst into comedy with "The Night of Terrifying Dreams" sequence in which a woman screams on the soundtrack "nightmare, nightmare" and "be careful of the girl in the hall, she's got a knife" as a woman screams silently on a television screen. As with the Cassandra Stark film, in which a punk bellows "leave us alone" at startled passers-by on a busy street, we are made to laugh because we recognize the precisely rendered New York cliché, suggesting that the film-makers take themselves perhaps slightly less seriously than the tone of the films might otherwise indicate. A final note on George's film—his use of sexually explicit gay material and the way it is contextualized—leads directly to the issue of pornography that I want to take up next. In *The Last 40 Days*, shots of hardcore gay sex are inserted strategically to make some very specific points about how both pornography and homosexuality are determined in our culture. Homosexual pornography viewed alongside a sign for Spartan Meats or the image of accelerated fla-

menco dancing taken from television says a lot about how gay sex is viewed by the dominant ideology—as exotic, yet commodifiable, 'other,' yet marketable. The point made is that pornography is very much a product of a specific ideology: gay sex may be potentially capable in certain instances of undermining reactionary notions about sexuality, but as part of the corporate pornography industry, it becomes equally entrenched, equally retrograde.

The two films by porno star Fred Halsted that I saw recently are remarkable for their awareness of these kinds of issues surrounding pornography, approaching an avant-garde filmic sensibility,¹⁰ while sustaining a very real documentary edge, and still remaining, unmistakably, hardcore blue movies. *L.A. Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage* illustrate very clearly the point Caroline Sheldon makes about the heightened sensibility that sexual illegality elicits. Whereas the 'art film' (and art practice in general) often appropriates homosexuality as a certain tendency of the artistic personality, or, if explicit gay sex is incorporated, merely for shock value, or to make some academic or ironic point, the Halsted films present themselves, unapologetically, as pornography, their purpose the exposure and celebration of the homosexual act. But unlike the usual commercial pornographic product, with its banal narrative pretexts, its boring, repetitive scenarios and dialogue, and its disregard for the importance of the play of formal elements to confer meaning, the Halsted films provide an example of *intelligent* pornography which succumbs neither to 'artistic compromise' nor the impoverishment of commodified sex.

L.A. Plays Itself begins 'innocently' enough with lyrical shots of nature which eventually become the setting for some explicit footage of two men giving each other head, ass-fucking, and so on. The men give the impression of being neither professional porn stars nor exploited youths (as is the norm in pornography), but rather, willing 'amateur' participants. The camera coverage of the sex here already distinguishes itself from that of the usual product: from voyeuristic telephoto shots with obstructions in the foreground to extreme close-ups of ass-fucking in which the proximity obscures the act, each shot is obviously designed for the production of meaning rather than mere expedience. A montage of various sexual positions with shots of nature in superimposition similarly suggests a more developed sense of film language. This initial sequence is then bluntly disrupted

by shots of a bulldozer tearing up the landscape, serving as a bridge to the latter part of the film set in LA, the subsequent shots of the urban setting as seen through the eyes of a heavily sideburned man driving in a car contrasting uncomfortably with the idyllic opening. We are shown the highly overdetermined field of gay signs that LA provides—a billboard of Mick Jagger in *Performance* and of a dog food ad promising “106 chunks of beef in every can,” gay power graffiti, and the repetitive zooming in to and out from a sign which reads, simply, LIPS—intercut with a sketchy narrative of an s & m relationship between the leather man with the sideburns and a young blond out-of-towner. The images are extreme (boot-licking, bondage and whipping, as well as explicit come shots), but, once again, placed in a complex, discursive filmic context. A shot of the masochist tied up on the floor taken from under the bed is interrupted by a voyeuristic sequence of men playing football in a park, obviously unaware of the camera. The use of telephoto ass and crotch shots ‘borrowed’ from a heterosexual milieu says a lot about homosexual fantasy, and its relation to the straight world, witnessed, also, by the provocative advertising imagery previously described: Halsted implies that uncomplicated and natural gay sex, as illustrated by the opening sequence, has been inevitably transformed by a masculinist and consumerist ideology. The soundtrack adds a further layer of meaning, with the use of ‘overheard’ dialogue (it sounds like Halsted talking to a potential hustler on the street who is unaware of being recorded), lending, along with the use of obviously streetwise ‘players,’ a documentary feel to the film.

Although the imagery associated with

the homosexual sadist in *L.A. Plays Itself* is disturbing and unsavoury, to say the least (inserts of dead insects on pins, or of an executioner), the film, as I’ve argued, doesn’t deal with the implications of this material irresponsibly, but rather, provides a meaningful context within which to account for the promulgation of these stereotypes. Halsted also presents the film, through various filmic signifiers and distancing techniques, very much as fantasy, as an exposition of the gay unconscious. What emerges is an aura of excitement around, almost a reverence for, the homosexual act, revelling in its heterodoxy, and its incendiary potential. The difference between this kind of pornography, emerging from a period of gay struggle, and the weak, generic, straight-influenced product of today, is vast.

Halsted’s *Sex Garage* is an exciting film for many of the same reasons, evoking Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, and in some ways, surpassing it. The very notion of a gay porno film set in a real gas station/garage, complete with tires, axle grease, and ‘girlie pictures’ on the walls, makes the same ironic points of *L.A. Plays Itself* about the influence of straight culture on gay fantasy. As if to emphasize this, the movie begins with a sequence of heterosexual sex, a woman on a car seat giving head to a man with long blond hair standing at the door, and later, the two fucking on the garage floor. The tone of this sequence is very different from the exploitative quality of virtually all heterosexual pornography I’ve seen. Again, both ‘players’ seem to be active, willing participants, and not part of the ‘professional circuit.’ The coverage of the sequence is also completely atypical, including ultra-close-ups which tend to abstract the activity, as well as shots

through the car window and a use of the hand-held camera which maintain a disturbing, voyeuristic distance from the proceedings. The sequence, accompanied by pop music on the soundtrack, is intercut with both a naked man masturbating in a shower, accompanied by classical music, and shots of cars, offering a context outside of the straightforward representation of sex. After the woman leaves, a sexually passive male enters the garage and takes her place, kissing the boots of the blond man and giving him head, the exchangeability of gender roles suggesting an opening up of sexual pleasure. The subsequent shots of gay sex are intercut, as in *L.A. Plays Itself*, with street signs (“bottomless,” “xxx”) and with close-ups of a man on a motorcycle, his boots, jacket, studs, and crotch. The motorcycle man finally arrives at the garage and engages in s & m sex with the two men, in the bathroom and on his ‘hog,’ culminating in the leather biker fucking some orifice of his bike and coming all over it.

Once again, the techniques Halsted uses in *Sex Garage* create a multiplicity of meaning that, without resorting to the alibis of art discourse, allows for an ideal pornography. The black and white verité photography, the use of over- and double exposed images, and the creative use of sound challenge us intellectually without betraying the clearly pornographic impulse behind the film. Too often pornography is seen as an excuse to disengage or escape from ‘acceptable behaviour’ or ‘political responsibility’; Halsted offers a more integrated definition of the pornographic.

I want to finish briefly with a look at five videos by gay men screened recently at A Space (the show entitled, significantly, *Another World*) in order to further illustrate some of the points I’ve



David MacLean's *It's Your Time*.



George Groshaw's *It's Only A Dime*.

already made about gay art practice. As a general impression, the works confirmed for me just how turgid the video idiom can become, the technical flourishes and stylistic conceits conforming all too readily to outmoded notions of homosexual aestheticism. This tendency is exacerbated by the failure of any of the tapes to align themselves with a current gay political agenda, the otherworldly motif conveniently side-stepping such essential concerns as AIDS and the homophobia it has generated, sexism within the homosexual community, ghettoization, or any number of other issues encountered daily by gays. Each of the five videos expresses gay experience through the same kind of camp language that Jack Babuscio speaks of, the metaphors of otherness maintaining homosexuality at a non-threatening distance: David McLean's *It's Your Time* and George Groshaw's *It's Only A Dime* play on images of camp nostalgia and Hollywood melodrama; Michael Balser's *Astroturf* appeals to a camp treatment of historical and science fiction models; Rolley Mossop's *Pleasure* and David McIntosh's *Fourth Person Plural*: (a sketch) retreat to the interiority of madness and personal obsession, respectively. Again, I'm not suggesting that these areas of exploration should be completely abandoned; but when viewed alongside of the frankly sexual and adamantly material contexts of the Halsted films, for example, their relevance becomes questionable.

Camp as an escape from political consciousness is particularly evident in the McLean and Groshaw tapes. In *It's Your Time*, McLean presents tinted-pink black and white images of nostalgia for the 'gay '70s,' embodied in the relationship between a blond escort/

hustler (McLean) and his dark-haired and moustached trick (Michael Balser). The video attempts to work ironically with the syntax of melodrama (a cigarette extinguished as the violin music swells, cut to a close-up of a disco ball), but with its slick production values and banal dialogue, remains complicit with the object of its own critique. Much of the material dealt with, such as the emptiness of the bar scene, or anxiety over coming out, seems remarkably anachronistic, an indication, perhaps, of the failure of gay culture to outgrow the limitations it has set for itself. The final two shots of the tape have McLean attempting to climb up a staircase that is merely a two-dimensional backdrop, and praying in front of a stained glass window. Both images are disturbingly apt, the former suggesting a lack of substance and direction, the latter, a campy appeal to spiritual redemption. Groshaw's *It's Only A Dime*, a short tape of a gay man in front of a mirror putting on make-up while singing such camp classics as *My Man* and *Ten Cents A Dance*, seems, similarly, to be an exercise in nostalgia, serving little purpose beyond its own self-absorption.

A frightening (and telling) continuity in this gay male video presentation is the marginalization of women. The McLean, Groshaw, and McIntosh tapes are, in fact, exclusively male, which, to some, considering the sexual identity of the artists, may make perfect sense. But I find myself mistrusting current work by homosexual men that dismisses women entirely, considering the important affinities between the gay and women's movements, and the desirability of their solidarity. Except for a female narrator who merely recounts scenarios of male pleasure in Mossop's

tape, the only work to include female characters is Balser's *Astroturf*, and then, somewhat problematically. Rhonda Abram's Copernicus playing sidekick to David McLean's Gallileo is, I suppose, a positive enough portrayal, although the purpose of their pseudo-philosophical banter remains unclear. Otherwise, we are offered the futuristic bitchy woman who impregnates Captain Kirk in a painfully unfunny science fiction parody, and, in the final section, a monologue by performance artist Meryn Cadell which seems to be mostly her own material, and is unsuccessfully integrated into the rest of the tape by Balser. The apparent inability of the gay male community to get beyond the misogyny it has inherited from straight culture is probably its greatest failure; the videos in question do little to address the imbalance, or even call it into question.

David McIntosh's *Fourth Person Plural* is particularly guilty of this aggressively masculinist position, in which three generations of gay males (child, father, and grandfather figures) are represented without any allusion to the female contribution to the regeneration of the species. As the dubious use of werewolf imagery to characterize certain aspects of gay sexual practice (such as cruising) might indicate, McIntosh's references to the horror genre are not accidental, suggesting a less than salutary view of homosexuality, and, again, one that bears little relation to any meaningful context outside of personal preoccupation or guilty indulgence. Although it undermines the authoritarian position of Freud in relation to the Wolf-man case history, the tape fails to question the implications of the sexual power inherent in the patriarchal system it describes, or explore the problem of



Michael Balser's *Astroturf*.



David McIntosh's *4th Person Plural*.

gays sexually idealizing the figure of the patriarch, and retreats, instead, into the murky area of private obsession.

As with the products of the Naked Eye Cinema, I've used this recent Toronto video work to make some points about the articulation of gay identity in art, or perhaps more aptly, the refusal to articulate it. If it is the purpose of art practice to render homosexuality less real, more convoluted and mysterious, then, for me, anyway, it fails. If, on the other hand, a pornographic film, like Halsted's, can create the "feats of discourse" that Barthes refers to, or induce, as Caroline Sheldon suggests, a "heightened sensibility about

the world" in its 'illegitimacy,' then it is unquestionably more desirable. If art still remains the closet, let's make pornography. □

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes. Preface to *Tricks* by Renaud Camus (New York: Ace Charter Books, 1981), p. vii.
2. Caroline Sheldon. "Lesbians and film: some thoughts," *Gays & Film*, ed., Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 10.
3. See my article on the Cinema of Transgression in *CineAction!* No. 5.
4. Jack Babuscio. "Camp and the gay sensibility," *Gays & Film*, ed., Richard Dyer (London:

British Film Institute, 1980).

5. *Ibid*, p. 50.

6. Vidal's famous quote: "When I hear someone talking about a gay sensibility, I reach for my pistol."

7. Richard Dyer. "Stereotyping," *Gays & Film*, ed., Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 36.

8. Vito Russo. *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 42.

9. Sheldon, p. 10.

10. Halsted's work has been recognized in art circles, having been included, for example, in MOMA's film collection in New York.

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A rugged Rock Hudson in **The Spiral Road** (1962).

Rock Hudson: HIS STORY

by Richard Lippe

IN JULY, 1985, THE FACT THAT ROCK HUDSON was an AIDS victim and gay became public, and until his death several months later Hudson and the Hollywood film industry received enormous mass media attention: the classical Hollywood cinema had denied the sexual orientation of its gay stars, the implication being that this was no longer tolerable. (Although the Hudson revelation didn't have the impact of Marilyn Monroe's death, it opened up another vulnerable area in the system. Besides the greater mythical resonance of Monroe's persona, she was a woman and heterosexual, hence more readily appropriated at all levels from the tabloids to Norman Mailer and Gloria Steinem. Hudson and Monroe were connected from the early '50s; both stars were promoted on the strength of their physical appeal.) Yet, as quickly as this issue became a hot news item, it was dropped after Hudson's death. While the media industries continuously shift focus to retain the public's interest, it is also highly likely that they chose not to pursue the issue beyond a certain point. For the media functions to promote the entertainment industry and has a huge stake in image construction.

My primary interest is how Hudson's gayness has been approached; I concentrate on the biographies that have appeared since his death. The general media response to Hudson's gayness is no less relevant, but these books have a permanent status, unlike the ephemeral effluvia of the tabloids. They represent the media's attempts to deal with Hudson's gay identity since the revelation has ceased to be topical. In the concluding section, I discuss Hudson's star persona.

THE TABLOIDS

ON JULY 25, 1985, A NEWS CONFERENCE informed the press that Hudson was an AIDS victim; in the weekly North American press the earliest articles on the release appear in the August 5 issue of *Time* and *Newsweek* which both featured the story in their 'Medicine' column. In *Time*, the emphasis is on providing information related to the disease and the need for better government funding to further research; in an accompanying article, Hudson is identified as 'almost certainly homosexual' and praised for making the announcement: he becomes the first major male Hollywood celebrity to 'come out.' In contrast, the *Newsweek* piece is almost exclusively centred on the fact that the AIDS revelation has exposed Hudson as gay but suggests, as does the *Time* article, that his announcement might make the public more aware of the disease; the following week the magazine, Hudson on its cover, did an in-depth

piece on AIDS. That week *Maclean's* also used Hudson on its cover to introduce an AIDS report.

From early August until December, it was *People Weekly* and the tabloids that regularly featured articles on Hudson; it is these that I am concerned with here as such publications are much less cautious about tackling controversial issues than the more reputable weeklies. After examining nearly 20 issues from the tabloid press, including *People Weekly*, *Star*, *National Enquirer* and *Globe*, the following points emerge:

- 1) The tabloids have no consistent position on Hudson's gayness. There is uncertainty as to how the public would respond to the revelation as Hudson had become, particularly through his long-running television series, an American institution; besides, as he was in critical condition, it became more difficult to denounce him. The revelation came from Hudson himself, undermining the scandal such information carries when it is revealed by others.
- 2) The tabloid articles are nonetheless homophobic—in several instances, blatantly. For example, the August 20 issue of the *Globe* features an accusation that Hollywood is controlled by the 'Lavendar Mafia.' Among other things, the article claims that Hudson wasn't gay when he arrived in Hollywood but was 'seduced' by Henry Willson his agent; it also identifies AIDS as the 'gay curse' and says that Hudson's admission of having AIDS has Hollywood's homosexual male stars 'shivering in terror.' The tabloids also exploit the story that Hudson, knowing he had AIDS, kissed Linda Evans on the mouth when filming a *Dynasty* episode. The implication is that, as gays are women-haters, they would have no qualms about endangering a woman's life. The stereotype of the homosexual as 'sissy' is recurrent.
- 3) There is a certain amount of confusion as to what to make of the fact that, given that all homosexuals are 'sissies,' Hudson managed successfully to give the impression of being heterosexual. The tabloids scrupulously avoid the implications of this: the possibility that heterosexuality itself is a construction.

THE BOOKS

SINCE HUDSON'S DEATH, THERE HAVE BEEN five books on him, four published within less than a year. The fifth, in hardback, is *My Husband, Rock Hudson: The Real Story of Rock Hudson's Marriage to Phyllis Gates*, by Phyllis Gates and Bob Thomas (Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1987). The book's primary lure is the promise of revealing whether or not the marriage was an 'arrangement' to protect Hudson's image. Gates has it both ways: she claims that the marriage was arranged by Hudson and Henry Willson and maintains complete innocence of this when she

entered into it. As Gates was employed as Willson's secretary at the time, the latter claim presupposes an extraordinary naiveté. (In Sara Davidson's book, Gates is reported as saying much the same thing, although Davidson reports that Gates isn't certain as to what happened. Also, Davidson says that a number of her interviewees told her Gates was bisexual; Gates attributes the allegation to Willson's slander campaign. [p. 89]) That Gates intends to give the impression of naiveté is strongly evident. Essentially, her story is a reworking of one of the staple plot lines of the Gothic novel: the heroine's 'dream' marriage gradually turns into a nightmare. As such, the book makes a very direct appeal to a female readership allowing for a venting of possible ambivalent or hostile feelings towards Hudson. That *My Husband, Rock Hudson* is to be taken as the book which reveals the 'truth' about Hudson the person is a given. Yet Gates' 'subjective' approach to Hudson and the marriage tends to foreground a confusion within bourgeois ideology: the truth as an either/or choice between the subjective and objective.

Despite its publishers' attempts to promote *My Husband, Rock Hudson* as the book the public has been waiting for, the indifference to the book seems due to its failure to contribute sufficiently to the public's desire for intimate revelations. The two most important books are *Rock Hudson, His Story* by Rock Hudson and Sara Davidson (William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986) and *Idol: Rock Hudson, The True Story of an American Film Hero* (Villard Books, 1986). *Rock Hudson* takes precedence as the book claims Hudson's authorization and participation; on the other hand, as the authors of *Idol* are members of the legitimate press, their book carries connotations of 'serious-minded' reportage. Both were given extensive promotion and proved very commercial, appearing in hard- and paperback. Unlike the others, they have been widely reviewed in mainstream newspapers and magazines. My concern is with their attempts to 'manage' the ideological cultural disturbances produced by the revelation of Hudson's gayness.

ROCK HUDSON, HIS STORY

ROCK HUDSON, HIS STORY, IS PREFACED with a note from Hudson: "... There's a lot I want to say and not too much time left. I want the truth to be told, because it sure as hell hasn't been before. So I've asked those who know me best—my real friends—to work with Sara Davidson in telling my story." (p. 3) The note is dated September 5, 1985—less than a month before Hudson's death. Many a celebrity 'autobiography' has been written in collaboration with a professional writer; *Rock Hudson* differs in that the project was undertaken when Hudson no longer had the physical or mental capacities to be an active participant. As Hudson's note proclaims, *Rock Hudson* was to be written by Davidson in collaboration with his "real friends." This undermines the notion that the book is autobiographical; it also opens up the question of 'the truth.' The truth about *what* does Hudson want told? Seemingly, the truth about every aspect of his professional and personal life; but even if Hudson had been able to provide the facts himself, this would still be necessarily highly selective. Furthermore, given that the book was to be written in light of the revelation that he was an AIDS victim and gay, Hudson would have undoubtedly thought of it as an exposé. As such, *Rock Hudson* would have been coloured, at least to an extent, by his and/or his publishers' ideas of what the potential readers of such a book would expect.

Although it is important to challenge the notion that *Rock Hudson* is, as the publishers' text on the inside back jacket of

the book announces, "... the definitive portrayal of one of Hollywood's most enduring stars," my primary concern with the book isn't with discrediting its truthfulness. It may contain, like any media text dealing with a particular star image, partially accurate information.

In a brief introduction, Davidson provides an orientation to *Rock Hudson*, reducible to three essential points: 1) Davidson is an 'average' person encountering the unconventional. She conveys this through her response to her initial meeting with Hudson and the various people in his household: "I drove out the front gates feeling panicky, disoriented. It was one of the most bizarre scenes I'd ever witnessed: the old lover and the new lover brushing elbows in the hall... what was I getting into?" (p. 14) 2) Davidson discovered that the off-screen Hudson was complex. "He was... a master of illusion..." and trying to unravel his story was "... like treading on a spider's web." (p. 15) On the following page she tells the reader: "The more elusive the story became, the more determined, the more obsessed I was to find out: What was the truth?" (p. 16) 3) Davidson chose Mark Miller, George Nader and Tom Clark as her principal collaborators.

Throughout the introduction Davidson insists upon her authorial position, but she neglects to mention who chose her to author the book, under what conditions, and who approved the results. Clearly, her employer(s) must include Miller whom Davidson admits to meeting before she began the Hudson interviews. There is also the question of why a woman was chosen. Given that the book is dealing with Hollywood and gayness, it would seem more logical to have selected a writer who is both familiar with the industry and openly gay. Why, for instance, didn't Nader, who now identifies himself as a professional writer, undertake the project? Possibly, Miller and/or others involved in setting up the project thought that the book wouldn't attract Hudson's female audience if it were written by a gay man. There is also the strong possibility that the person(s) commissioning the book had no interest in its political potential. Miller, who is quoted as saying when he learned Hudson had AIDS, "I thought it was a disease that fairies on Santa Monica Boulevard got," (p. 249), would appear to be a person with no commitment to the political whatsoever.

Although Davidson doesn't identify herself as 'objective,' she gives this impression through her liberal slant. Concerning gays and their lifestyles, she makes no statements that can be directly construed as judgmental; yet she is very cautious about such issues as societal attitudes, restricting her comments to the most obvious, e.g. during the '50s homophobia was rampant. While she acknowledges that the fear of audience rejection prevents current gay stars from coming out, the strongest inference she offers is that she, like any contemporary middle-class person, isn't hung-up about homosexuality. That gay actors can't be open about their orientation, or that for an actor to play a gay character in a film is considered risktaking, is never discussed. Nor does Davidson address the fact that the Hollywood cinema has had and continues to have a huge economic commitment to the promotion of traditional gender roles and a reinforcing of heterosexuality as the norm. In side-stepping the deeply ingrained homophobia within the film industry (see Gregg Kilday's "Hollywood's Homosexuals," *Film Comment*, April, 1986, and Samir Hachem's "Inside the Tinselled Closet," *The Advocate*, March 17, 1987), in the films it produces and in many viewers, Davidson implies that there are no relevant issues beyond a chronicling of Hudson's sexual escapades and various attachments.

In the first chapter, Davidson recounts Hudson's activities during July, 1985, beginning with the disastrous taping of a

segment of *Doris Day's Best Friends* and concluding with his return to Los Angeles after the notorious Paris trip. In the following chapters, she treats Hudson's life sequentially, moving back and forth between the personal and professional but concentrating on the former. While she emphasizes his ambitiousness and willingness to be molded into a studio product, Davidson offers no analysis of the construction of his star image. For example, her sole comment on *A Farewell to Arms* (1957) is: "Rock seemed soft, almost sappy in the role and entirely unbelievable as the adventurer-soldier drawn to war." (p. 105) Failing to recognize that Hudson's "soft" presence might be a crucial component of his image, Davidson, somewhat ironically, chides him for appearing less than 'masculine.' Her concern is to foreground Hudson's convincing impersonation of the 'ideal' heterosexual male; she never suggests that the films might be reread in relation to his gay identity. Thus Davidson at once asserts that Hudson, who seemed so honest onscreen, was dishonest, and preserves the films as coherent texts about heterosexual characters and their relations. Not surprisingly, this project is most evident in her discussion of *Pillow Talk* (1959), the first of three films teaming Hudson and Doris Day, which launched the series of sex comedies Hudson starred in between 1959-1965. Here Davidson isn't as perfunctory as she is with Hudson's other films (understandable given the film's popularity). Nevertheless, she is strictly interested in the Hudson/Day teaming. Long before dealing with the film, she refers to them as "...the embodiment of all that could be beautiful and true between a man and woman." (p. 42) She says of *Pillow Talk*: "She [Doris Day] wants to get married, and he [Rock Hudson] wants to go to bed. Viewed today, it all looks so primitive, and yet, so much clearer and cleaner than our vague rumblings about ambivalence and commitment." (p. 115) In taking this nostalgic approach, she endorses the gender roles Day and Hudson embody in the film and its depiction of sexual difference. Nowhere does she acknowledge the film's indulgence of masculine phantasies about sex-gender relations, and she makes nothing of the dual image the film plays upon.

In her introduction, Davidson establishes that her search to uncover the truth led, at times, to conflicting reports; in other instances, she found confirmation impossible as the principal participants were either dead or uncertain as to what had happened. According to Davidson, the most important of these unresolvable issues is the motive behind Hudson's 1956 marriage to Phyllis Gates. Was he forced into the marriage by Henry Willson to prevent *Confidential* magazine from publishing an exposé identifying him as homosexual? Davidson never indicates for whom this is "the central conundrum of Rock Hudson's life"; but, after airing the conflicting views, she offers her own opinion that, while Hudson may have had career concerns, the marriage wasn't simply an arrangement. Although it takes a very convoluted form, what is embedded in the marriage question is Davidson's contention, posited early in the book, that Hudson's sexual orientation was, in actuality, bisexual. Davidson doesn't offer strong evidence in support; nevertheless, the statement functions to produce a bonding between Hudson and heterosexual desire. In effect, Davidson is opening a space in which Hudson, as a sexual being, isn't gay. It is obvious, I think, that his is her primary concern given her cursory remarks on bisexuality which amount to saying that it is now socially acceptable to be bisexual. (p. 56) Significantly, Davidson doesn't acknowledge that all individuals are originally bisexual no matter which direction their orientation takes in early childhood.

When views conflict, Davidson almost inevitably has Miller and Nader give their version. Without claiming the Miller/Nader account as 'the truth,' Davidson never challenges it. They occasionally produce internal conflict: they deride the Hudson of the mid-'50s for placing his career above friendship; later, the Hudson of the mid-'60s, the point at which his career begins slipping, is chided for privileging his personal life. These two men, who have been lovers since the late '40s, are described by Davidson as Hudson's "family" (p. 16). According to Miller and Nader, they became close friends with Hudson in the late '40s; like Hudson, Nader became a contract player at Universal Studios, and in the early '70s Hudson hired Miller as his secretary. They are intended to be taken, in fact, as the books' moral centre, attaining this status through Davidson's almost reverential praising of their personalities. Of Nader she says, "...but it is his character that continues to dazzle: kind, truthful, dear, wise. His word is gold. Where Mark can be excitable, George is like a river, calm on the surface with powerful currents below. He does not stew over what is petty or trivial, but has a knack for seeing beyond." (p. 53) Nevertheless, Nader and Miller express an extreme animosity towards Hudson in numerous instances. Perhaps these remarks are to be taken as signalling their truthfulness. In any case, 'MarkandGeorge,' as the reader is told, they are known to their friends, gain their moral stature through the juxtaposition of their lives and Hudson's; whereas Hudson wasn't able to find happiness, they supposedly have. As presented by Davidson, the central factor which distinguishes Miller and Nader from Hudson is the latter's immaturity. The distinction seems to be that Miller and Nader are 'good' homosexuals who know their place and don't rock the boat. Judging from their comments, the two men take pride in an existence which makes them 'invisible' homosexuals. Additionally, there is the strong implication that both men are monogamous and found Hudson's promiscuous lifestyle distasteful.

Davidson's thematic regarding Hudson is deception, her project is to expose the discrepancy between star image and person. In his films, Hudson was utterly convincing as a masculine male who possessed such qualities as stability, sincerity and honesty; Davidson found Hudson the person to have been duplicitous, insensitive, irresponsible and egotistical. Hudson is characterized as severely stunted in emotional growth, incapable of sustaining an 'adult' relationship and tending to evade confrontations. *Rock Hudson* recounts numerous incidents illustrating Hudson's neurotic behaviour in dealing with his lovers and friends. In most instances there is no indication that the narrator of the incident might have his or her own emotional hang-ups. Nor does Davidson acknowledge that there can be extreme pressures within the movie-making business which might have had an impact on Hudson's personal responses. Instead, she resorts to popular psychology to explain his behaviour and personality: when Hudson was seven years old, his father abandoned him causing irreparable trauma. And, although Davidson doesn't take the step, she offers the reader the option of making the connection between abandonment, neurosis and homosexuality. In such an alignment, homosexuality is the result of a neurotic disorder. What this suppresses is the possibility that the homosexual child may become neurotic because society has denied the validity of his or her sexual orientation.

In constructing a narrative centred on the 'puzzle' of a celebrity's life and using an interview format as a means to the 'solution,' Davidson's book is reminiscent of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*; like the film, *Rock Hudson* is a sour version of the American success story. As with Kane, Hud-



Tempestuous romance between Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson in **Giant**.

son's professional gains become his personal losses. In recent years, this scenario has been increasingly associated with stars of Hollywood's classical period, e.g., Christina Crawford's *Mommie Dearest*, B.D. Hyman's *My Mother's Keeper*. (Donald Spoto's *The Dark Side of Genius* also belongs to the cycle as Alfred Hitchcock constructed a media image that had 'star' connotations.) One implication is that such a false image-making Hollywood no longer exists—it isn't the dehumanizing factory it once was. Also, since the demise of classical Hollywood cinema in the early '60s, there has been a more open ambivalence towards the Hollywood cinema and these books offer satisfaction to those who feel resentful about having bought into its illusory world. But their primary appeal lies in assuring the reader that no matter how unfulfilling life may be, s/he is, in the final account, more fortunate than most film stars. Essentially these books, in the tradition of sensationalistic journalism, read like horror stories in which the Hollywood cinema, which has always carried, under the demands of the bourgeois value system, the seeds of the destruction of its iconic figures, leads to the spiritual and bodily corruption of the individual. If *Rock Hudson* differs from its predecessors, it is that the book is so very much an '80s cautionary tale. In Davidson's account of Hudson's life, the constant factor is his excessive indulgence in physical pleasures: smoking, drinking, promiscuous sex. While Hudson couldn't be saved, his story, it appears, is being told as a warning and his self-destruction is counter-

pointed by the salvation, through Alcoholics Anonymous, of Tom Clark (Hudson's long-time friend and/or lover, depending on whose version you take). Hudson, too, is permitted a last-minute transfiguration: "Tom pulled the blanket up to his chin. Rock's skin was transparent, he was a frail skeleton, yet as I [Davidson] stood there, he opened his eyes and gave a smile that was unearthly in its radiance. Where was it coming from, I wondered. His body had sunk to nothing, and it was as if the brilliance of his being was in his eyes." (pp. 297-298) The point is clear: spiritual redemption becomes possible only after the transgressive body has been ravaged beyond hope of recovery.

Despite its attempt to produce a liberal viewpoint, the book is insistent on condemning Hudson. The issue of Hudson's irresponsibility with regard to Linda Evans, the possibility that he gave her AIDS when he kissed her on the mouth in a 1985 *Dynasty* episode, is a case in point. While the furor over this incident has subsided and while AIDS is no longer regarded as simply a gay disease although the stigma persists, condemnation still seems to be the crucial factor in dealing with Hudson and what he is about. In this case, it is to bemoan the fact that he wasn't what he pretended to be, the ideal masculine male supposedly beyond reproach. Ultimately, though, Hudson isn't the issue. What is in question is not an individual but the homophobic propensities of our culture.



Doris Day and Rock Hudson: **Pillow Talk** (1959).

IDOL

THAT JERRY OPPENHEIMER'S AND JACK Vitek's *Idol* was published the same month as *Rock Hudson* can hardly be coincidence. Obviously, the publishers of *Idol* were concerned about the 'authorized' *Rock Hudson* having a market edge over their book; in its hardback printing, each copy of *Idol* was sealed with a red paper band inscribed with bold black lettering UNAUTHORIZED, with "The explosive story Rock Hudson could never tell" in white typeset beneath. The inscription seeks to give the impression that *Idol*, because it is unauthorized, will provide the reader with the more telling account, but in actuality there is nothing in *Idol* which makes it appreciably different from *Rock Hudson*. What distinguishes *Idol* is that Oppenheimer and Vitek intend their book as a sympathetic account of Hudson. Basically, their view is that Hudson, like Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland, was a victim of the Hollywood studio system which exploited its stars to the maximum. Their position is more complex than this but Oppenheimer and Vitek seem to be offering this 'insight' as their justification. Aside from the fact that they can be accused of practising exploitation themselves, their attack on the studio system tends to be irritatingly self-righteous. Hudson, arguably, wouldn't have had a career without the studio system, given the initial limitations of his talent; in any case it is a gross simplification to claim that Hudson and, for that matter,

Monroe and Garland were nothing more than helpless victims of Hollywood's myth-making machinery.

Ostensibly, Oppenheimer's and Vitek's project is to lament the fact that Hollywood turned Hudson into a commodity. (They fail to perceive that the following statement takes on an ironic dimension: "Even in death, Rock Hudson was a bankable commodity." [p. 239]) But if Hollywood is to be condemned, where does this leave Hudson himself—why did he allow himself to be used? Their explanation, not unlike Davidson's, is in Hudson's childhood experiences: he was separated from the father he loved; he had a mother who was both overbearing and doting and a stepfather he detested. According to Oppenheimer and Vitek, Hudson's childhood years permanently marked his personality, preventing him from making the transition from boyhood to manhood: "For the rest of his life, he displayed a deep-seated passivity, an almost fatalistic docility, strikingly at odds with the image he presented to the world—that of a competent, all-American man." (p. 8) Clearly, although they don't directly say so, their contention is that an adult (i.e., any normal-heterosexual-man) wouldn't have tolerated the authoritarian policies of the Hollywood studio system. Moreover, the authors are well aware that 'passivity' and 'docility' are considered feminine characteristics; but they make no distinction between gender identification and sexual orientation. The following is indicative: "While millions of female fans swooned over him as the ideal heart throb, Rock had a small circle of celebrity female

friends who were aware of his sexual preference but still found him attractively masculine." (p. 107) Not surprisingly, their attitude to homosexuality is flagrantly contradictory. They assert in one paragraph that homosexuality is not to be equated with immaturity and in the next that maturity is to be equated with heterosexual marriage. (p. 93) (To avoid any possible misconception arising out of their interest in their subject, both authors are careful to dedicate the book to their wives.)

In contrast to *Rock Hudson*, *Idol* avoids, with the exception of Marc Christian, dealing with Hudson's gay lovers. On the other hand, the book parallels *Rock Hudson* in its emphasis on the possibility that Hudson may have had heterosexual experiences during the '50s and early '60s. But Oppenheimer and Vitek, like Davidson, have no means of supporting this beyond speculative statements from several of Hudson's co-workers and/or friends. However slight in substance, these comments allow for a recasting of Hudson's sexual orientation from homosexual to bisexual. In *Idol*, this is particularly jarring given that the authors seem incapable of accepting any deviant sexual practice.

The fact that Miller, Nader and Clark don't participate in *Idol* and Marc Christian does is eloquent about the competitive nature of the two books. As for the handling of the AIDS revelation, it is conceivable that Oppenheimer and Vitek thought *Rock Hudson* was going to laud Hudson for his heroic self-declaration. Their argument concerning the revelation and its aftermath hinges on their claim that Hudson himself never publicly acknowledged that he had AIDS: he would undoubtedly have preferred to safeguard his image. They see the revelation as a betrayal by those closest to him; furthermore, they accuse Hollywood of being indifferent to the AIDS issue until one of its myths was in jeopardy and needed to be revamped. They sum up: "Perhaps it should not be surprising that Rock Hudson, who lived his life in a haze of myth, should have a myth surrounding his death as well. But such a myth can be unfair, not only to the man himself, who was a real person and not just a studio prop, but to the thousands of people, their families, and friends, who are currently struggling with the disease that killed him—and deserve better than to be asked to judge themselves against a Hollywood hero." (p. 223) Possibly, Oppenheimer and Vitek are sincere in voicing these concerns, but their belittling of any possible heroism involved isn't convincingly argued. This happens, I think, because the authors have avoided addressing what is making them uncomfortable: the AIDS revelation exposed Hudson as gay and this, in turn, raised the disturbing notion that a 'masculine' male identity is something that can be fabricated or, alternatively, is not incompatible with homosexuality. Not only was Hudson, as their book's title suggests, a false god, but his exposure threatened the sanctity of what he impersonated. Most likely, if Hudson had been exposed as gay under less appalling circumstances, they would have felt compelled to implicate him more directly in the deception. Their implicit attitude is: 'This is Hollywood, Gentlemen. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'

If Oppenheimer and Vitek are genuine about their regard for Hudson the person, it is difficult to understand why they are content to take such a simplistic approach. They castigate the media for holding a 'death watch,' yet they provide an account of Hudson's final hours which is written in such a way as to appeal to the most morbid-minded. Perhaps they would argue that they were presenting the 'truth' unflinchingly, but at bottom there isn't a great deal of difference between their 'legitimate' reportage and tabloid journalism.

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY ELDERS

IN ADDITION TO FIVE BIOGRAPHICAL BOOKS on Hudson,* another recent work, Boze Hadleigh's *Conversations With My Elders* (St. Martin's Press, 1987), deserves mention. An interview book, its unifying principle is that each of the six interviewees (Sal Mineo, Luchino Visconti, Cecil Beaton, George Cukor, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Rock Hudson) were a) gay and b) prominent figures within the filmmaking industry. That the interviews were given is in itself remarkable, especially in the case of Hollywood actors (it is much easier for a European 'art' film director to acknowledge his gayness than a Hollywood star whose career is dependent on a heterosexual image); but even more so as Hadleigh must have informed his participants that he considered the interview to be in the nature of a political declaration. In his introduction Hadleigh makes clear what he takes to be political about these interviews. He writes: "All six men in this collection are gay. They could as easily, if less dramatically, have been British, bilingual, or left-handed. That all were homosexual or bisexual is not a political statement; that virtually all published interviews—and some biographies—deliberately omit a subject's gayness, is." (p. 2)

As the word 'conversations' indicates, Hadleigh was attempting to produce, as he does with Hudson, an informal dialogue. One of the most striking results is that the reader receives a very different impression of Hudson as person than that presented in the two major biographies: he reveals himself as neither a cipher (Davidson) nor a victim (Oppenheimer and Vitek); instead he provides, often with cynical humour, a keen appraisal of what his existence in Hollywood as a 'closet' gay person has been about. (Recently, Tom Clark, in the *National Enquirer*, March 3, 1987, challenged the interview's authenticity claiming that Hudson would not have revealed intimacies to a stranger and, if he had, he would have expressed himself differently. Clark offers no evidence for this assertion beyond personal opinion.) With Hudson, Hadleigh seems to push (further than in any of the other interviews) the suggestion that Hollywood's closet gays could make a significant contribution to gay liberation by 'coming-out.' Hudson, in response, doesn't acknowledge any interest in sexual politics and, if anything, tries to maintain that the personal isn't political unless the individual wants to make it so. Nevertheless, Hudson reveals, and perhaps more directly than he intends, his embittered feelings about the oppressive treat-

* Janet Friedman's *Rock Hudson: The Story of a Giant* (Sharon Publications, Inc., 1985) and Mark Bego's *Rock Hudson: Public and Private* (Signet, New American Library, 1986) are slight projects compared to the major biographies. Their interest lies in their attempts to recuperate Hudson. Friedman's contention is that women were never particularly concerned about what Hudson the person did: instead, they were enamoured of the image of the 'romantic hero' he embodied in many of his '50s films, the films and Hudson's persona functioning as the cinematic equivalent of Harlequin novels. Although Friedman's contention introduces an interesting notion about spectator relation to star imagery, she doesn't provide any theoretical underpinning. Bego's stance is that the AIDS/gay revelation doesn't diminish Hudson's heroic image—it, in fact, complements it with Hudson now becoming a 'real-life' hero. Interestingly, Bego never suggests that Hudson may have been bisexual: he implies that a gay man can become a heroic figure to the general public, but doesn't confront the corollary, that he can only become a hero by dying.

ment gays receive in films, the film industry and the media at large. In doing so, Hudson exposes the contradiction of his position; and, it is a position to which Hadleigh, despite his prodding, is sensitive.

At one point Hadleigh asks Hudson how many top actors in Hollywood are gay. On concluding, Hudson remarks: "Trust me, Boze, America does not want to know." (p. 195) Hudson should have said, "... does not want to know *for certain*." As the widely spread Hudson/Jim Nabors marriage rumour of the late '60s testifies, the public seems to enjoy entertaining the *possibility* of having a star's deceptions exposed. (Several years ago, this was demonstrated in the persistent rumour that Burt Reynolds had AIDS which, given the media's identification of AIDS as a homosexual disease, was tantamount to saying that Reynolds was gay. Despite Reynolds' highly publicized involvements with women, his playfulness with the macho male image may have produced suspicions about his sexual orientation.) Most likely, Hudson had no intention of ever telling the public he was gay; yet the very fact that he agreed to talk to Hadleigh indicates that there was an impulse to 'come out.' It isn't inappropriate that, towards the end of the interview, Hudson should say, "Well whether they want to know it or not, they have to get to accept people for what they are." (p. 206) Again, although not without contradiction, the statement seems paradoxically closer to the truth about the Hudson story.

STAR IMAGE

HUDSON'S STAR IMAGE HAS TAKEN ON another dimension with the knowledge that Hudson the person was gay. On the other hand, I think his image, as it exists in films, doesn't allow for an alternative or contradictory reading: his roles never produce the sharp conflict that developed (for example) between the popular image of James Stewart and the use made of him in the '50s by Hitchcock and Mann (see Andrew Britton's *Katharine Hepburn: the Thirties and After*, Tyneside Cinema, 1984). Richard Dyer, in his article "Rock: The Last Guy You'd Have Figured?" (*Body Politic*, December, 1985) seems to be arguing for such a reading when he suggests that Hudson, both in the '50s Sirk melodramas and the '60s sex comedies (the films most relevant to the shaping of the image), functions to 'subvert' what he is meant to substantiate: "In both the comedies and the melodramas, Rock's presence throws into question the ideas and the viability of heterosexual masculinity." (p. 29) Dyer's argument, however, pushes too hard to produce a reading that is dependent on knowing that Hudson the person was gay. This is particularly so in his claim that the sex comedies, viewed in this light, rival the intricacies of the 'gay/straight confusion' premises found in such films as *La Cage aux Folles* and *Victor/Victoria*. The idea itself is intriguing but the films, whether in subject matter (the negotiation of heterosexual relations) or in narrative trajectory (the construction of the monogamous couple, marriage and the nuclear family), cannot sustain the conceit.

Before the Sirk melodramas, Hudson's star roles were in adventure films or westerns, continuing the tradition of the 'heroic' male image as constructed in the classical Hollywood cinema. In the early '50s, the Hudson version of heterosexual masculinity was already old-fashioned, giving way to the seemingly more naturalistic forms of masculine identity that Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando and James Dean embodied in their films. In addition to their 'unconventional' acting styles (derived from the Method School of the Actor's Studio) and presences, the fascination of these actors resided

in their challenge to the heterosexual male stereotype, taking the form of an intuned, narcissistic male identity with the actors conveying more interest in themselves both as actors and characters than in the women to whom they were supposedly relating. (This male self-absorption is reflected in the '50s Hollywood cinema in general. It was accompanied by a decline of the woman's film and of major female stars which wasn't reversed until the early '70s.) Arguably, it is because of this that Hudson's old-fashioned image takes on a strong appeal for the female spectator. This comes to the foreground in the Sirk melodramas in which Hudson switches to the romantic hero image. In *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), the film which established Hudson as a major star, and even more so, in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Hudson embodies a 'father/son/lover' image which exists to fulfil the conflicting desires and needs of the Jane Wyman character. Contrary to Dyer, I don't think Sirk himself perceives this ideal male image as something that existed and is to be regained. Rather, Sirk presents the ideal as if placed in quotation marks. It is an 'image'—a construction that Sirk encourages his audience to read as a fantasy. That Sirk isn't endorsing this male image is very apparent in *Written on the Wind* (1956) in which Hudson, again the 'perfect' image of heterosexual masculinity, functions as a figure of oppression and destruction.

In *All That Heaven Allows*, what is perhaps most striking about Hudson's persona is that it incorporates certain traits (passivity, vulnerability, gentleness and even delicacy) which are aligned with the feminine. It is Hudson's ability to display such traits while maintaining a secure masculine identity which makes him fascinating from a contemporary viewpoint. In a different way, this aspect of his persona which entails a disregard for rigid gender-role divisions is found in *A Farewell to Arms* (1957); Hudson, in falling in love with Jennifer Jones, abandons the male value system which previously had given definition to his identity, and succumbs to Jones' fatalistic romanticism. Unfortunately, there is no consistent attempt in Hudson's films to develop the image along these lines. *Giant* (1956), for example, which won Hudson an Academy Award nomination, has him portraying a patriarch who, through the influence of his wife and children, gradually learns to be less sexist and racist. The film, in addition to chronicling the social changes taking place within 20th century America during several decades, is, supposedly, performing a critique of the Hudson character; but it also wants to make this character an appealing evocation of what 'real' men were like before the heyday of liberalism. Essentially, the project is to relate the Hudson image to the 'macho' male image but, as is demonstrated in the film's climactic roadside cafe brawl, in which the character finds an outlet for his pent-up aggressions and does so in a context that wins his wife's admiration, Hudson doesn't have the kind of conviction about his character to make the scene as exhilaratingly satisfying as it is intended to be. Most likely, he and his advisors would have shied away from placing an overt emphasis on any traits within his persona that seemed to feminize him. Yet, under different circumstances, it is conceivable that Hudson, even with his commanding physical stature, could have successfully cultivated an image of the sensitive male not unlike that of Clift with his slender physique.

From *Magnificent Obsession* to *This Earth Is Mine* (1959), Hudson had been primarily cast in melodramas playing variations on the romantic hero; but by the late '50s, as Sirk says in *Sirk on Sirk* (The Viking Press, Cinema One, 1972), the Hollywood cinema was in transition, seeking an identity more in keeping with the changes society was undergoing.

Certain generic formulas, such as those underpinning the melodrama/woman's film, no longer seemed capable of accommodating contemporary issues. It is at this point that Hudson appeared in *Pillow Talk* (1959) which served to establish him as a light comedian. With the move from the melodramas to the sex comedies, Hudson's image takes on a new sophistication; more specifically, in several of these sex comedies, the Hudson character constructs an alternative image of himself for the purpose of seducing the heroine. Of the films in which this occurs, *Pillow Talk* is the most interesting; in it, Hudson's Brad Allen (the film's personification of heterosexual masculinity) invents Rex Stetson, a parody of the romantic hero given connotations of Texas gallantry. In his persona as Brad Allen, Hudson, as a means of winning the Doris Day character for himself, progressively casts doubt on his alter ego's virility, suggesting first that he is a mama's boy and, subsequently, that he may be gay. The film, therefore, whilst toying with different aspects of the Hudson image, uses this play to re-affirm the image of heterosexual masculinity.

There is, I think, no question that Hudson in the sex comedies is intended as a replacement for the aging Cary Grant, and a comparison between the two star personas is very illuminating. Andrew Britton, in his exemplary article "Cary Grant: the Comedy of Male Desire" (*CineAction!*, Winter '86-'87) convincingly argues that Grant, in three late '30s 'screwball' comedies, *The Awful Truth*, *Holiday* and *Bringing Up Baby*, embodies a version of heterosexual masculinity which is premised on the realization of a man's 'femininity.' Britton points out that Grant's being both romantic and comic contributes to this but, on the other hand, doesn't fully explain his ability to formulate the type of masculinity he does; the Grant persona, Britton contends, posits (particularly in Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*) an image of positive bisexuality allowing for both his character and the Katharine Hepburn character to share gender characteristics. (p. 43) In contrast, in the sex comedies, it is precisely the need to discredit the feminine traits in the Hudson persona which becomes a limitation. The films function to reassert traditional gender-role distinctions and particularly at the expense of their heroines, who tend to be in danger of losing their femininity through their contesting of masculine privilege. Basically, in the late '30s Grant comedies, the 'happy ending' celebrates the heterosexual couple's abandonment of gender role constrictions, whereas in the sex comedies, it celebrates their restoration.

Man's Favorite Sport? (1964) is an exception; a Hawks film, it is, in fact, a reworking of *Bringing Up Baby* with Hudson and Paula Prentiss playing variations on the Grant and Hepburn roles. Hudson's masculine image, predicated on his supposed fishing expertise, is exposed by Prentiss and never recovered. As in *Bringing Up Baby*, the antagonism Hudson feels toward Prentiss gives way when he realizes that she has helped release him from a masculine image he didn't really want to uphold. If *Man's Favorite Sport?* isn't quite as satisfying as *Bringing Up Baby*, it is perhaps because Hudson at times seems acutely aware of his humiliation; on the other hand, Hawks is sensitive to Hudson's persona having Prentiss display a comparable vulnerability.

Actually, in the '60s, the foregrounding of Hudson's star persona is not only found in sex comedies; both *The Spiral Road* (1962) and *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963) pivot on the viewer's expectations of what kind of character Hudson will play, with an attempt to make the Hudson image more ambiguous and complex. In *The Spiral Road*, Hudson, until almost mid-point, is presented as an idealistic doctor; there is

an abrupt reversal when Hudson admits his 'heroic' image has been a deception. Although the character eventually undergoes a spiritual redemption, the fact remains that the film's subject matter can be taken as being the split between the image and the person. Similarly, in *A Gathering of Eagles*, Hudson gradually reveals himself to the viewer and the other characters as much more ruthless and overbearing than his initial 'nice guy' image implies. This drawing attention to the Hudson image as a construction, culminates in *Seconds* (1965) in which an unhappy, dissatisfied middle-aged man (played by John Randolph) finds an organization that will, for a fee, transform him into an image and identity that speaks of his (and, supposedly, the viewer's) idea of perfection: the organization turns the Randolph character into Hudson who, ultimately, rejects the image he has been given, wanting to return to his former self.

I have tried to indicate the extent to which the Hudson films themselves foreground his image and persona. Although the impact of the revelation that Hudson the person was gay shouldn't be underestimated, it also shouldn't lead to an attempt to lock his image into a definitive reading which is dependent on this knowledge. □

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PLEASURE IN THE DARK:

Sexual Difference and Erotic Deviance in the Articulation of a Female Desire

by Dot Tuer

IN THE 1890s, CINEMA AND PSYCHOANALYSIS emerged as silent partners in a complex nexus of phantasy, desire, fetishism, and voyeurism which would sweep the vocabulary of sexuality in the 20th century. But it would be nearly a century later, when a Frenchman named Metz took a Frenchman named Lacan into a semiotic grazing land that psychoanalysis and cinema would meet face to face. The historical conditions which contributed to this summit of mind and matter were an intricate affair: a mesh of ideological dichotomies, imperialist designs, sexual politics. While cinema was born of Méliès' dreams and psychoanalysis of Vienna's hysterics, it was America, with its economic stronghold over the film industry, which created the territory of discourse. Eisenstein's montage, Griffith's close-up, Italy's Neo-Realism, France's Nouvelle Vague, Cinema Verité and Avant-Garde Surrealism became the theoretical terrain of film history's canon, but it was the classical Hollywood film, replete with narratives of stars and sexuality and romance, which was mass produced and massively consumed. As it flooded world markets with its white heterosexual paradigm, Hollywood cinema became the focal lens where sexual fantasy was superimposed upon ideology. Neo-marxists critiqued this dominant cinema as a perversion of the 'popular memory.' Revolutionaries and artists sought to subvert the machinery. But as images replaced text as the mechanism of transference, the 'golden age' of Hollywood became bound up in a technological imaginary of the sexual status quo and an ideological imaginary of popular culture.

Cinema became the projection of pleasure. It was the object of desire; the object of envy. This conflation of sexuality, technology, and ideology became a complicated web to unravel. So when the object of envy became the object of analysis through semiotic readings, it seemed as if theory had caught up with the complexity of cinema's dissemination. By the mid-'70s Lacan's imaginary became Metz's signifier for the cinematic apparatus. Semiotics had created a textual space where a language of film could be elaborated, where the transference of speech and the projections of cinema could meet. Cinema, by its very distance from the spectator, its illusion of closeness, the absence of its objects, became the site of all desire, spatially and conceptually reproduced in the conditions of viewing. When Laura Mulvey published *Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema* (1975), however, feminism had a word or two to say about the meta-desire of film theory. The object of analysis became the object of scrutiny. The pleasure of spectatorship was revealed as the psychic construction of a fetish which eradicated women as desiring subjects. 'Sexual difference' was coined as the password of feminist theory, and the silent partners of the 1890s became the stock footage of a 1980s patriarchy.

The construction of sexual difference, Mulvey claimed, was inscribed into the very fabric of a narrative language within classical cinema. It was a language of *mise-en-scène* and editing, of bodily poses which affected closure through the erasure of women. Film was no longer an imaginary meeting of phantasy and technology, but a very real reproduction of psychic oppression. The spectator in the darkened theatre was explicitly male. Cinema erected his position as a voyeur who constructs erotic pleasure through looking. Women, as the object of this active scopophilia, became dismembered bodies without desire, chimeras created by flickering light. Cinema was the site of fetishism, where the disavowal of castration was transplanted upon the image of the female body. Women as passive, as Other, as illusion, were bonded into representation by a gaze which was male. Their objectification was the guarantee of male pleasure.

Within this paradigm, so forcefully embraced by feminists and theorists alike, the hermetic circle was complete. Lumière's shimmering bodies leaving the train station and Freud's vision of the hysteric's frigid poses of delirium had merged over the century into a cul-de-sac vision of sexual oppression. As women, we were given the tools to critique pleasure but no power to produce it. Our bodies became absent from the frame of the film, or deconstructed beyond recognition. Unpleasurable cinema became an intellectualized pursuit among the avant-garde. Positive images and alternative narratives which sought an ideological reversal were thought to be naive in their binary strategy. And those who would continue to insist upon their sexual representation were as effective as a dog nipping at Freud's heels. In fact, they were quickly elided with the Coppertone commercials, suddenly, as if in a dream, displaced into the dog which tugs at the woman's towel, complicit in an erotic sensation which always reveals the woman's flesh as wounded, incomplete. Feminist film theorists struggled with this dilemma, desperately seeking a way out of this elided position.

In the wake of the French feminist writings, Mary Ann Doane published *Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing The Female Spectator* (1982), the final splutter in a complex debate on the possibility of women's pleasure within the psychoanalytic maze. She began by citing French feminism's analysis of woman's proximity to her own body and the consequent impossibility of fetishism. In response, she located a place for women as viewing subjects in appropriation, where the female takes up the gaze from a position of sexual mobility. Masquerade gave 'woman' the possibility of challenging her surface signification through an excess femininity, through a transexed gaze, that doubled back upon the proximity of the female body towards a distant objectification. As a theoretical treatise, Doane's piece was fascinating, but as a mapping of the female spectator, it only served to reinforce the Minotaur's supremacy. It seemed that no

matter which way women turned, they were inevitably the projection of the absent other, specularized by a homogeneous male gaze.

Just as this debate cornered itself into a psychic impasse, issues of sexuality were heating up in middle America. Profoundly influenced by a gender-role theory in which the ego superseded the unconscious and sexual difference was born of cultural oppression, two diverse camps emerged within the American feminist movement of the 1980s. The imaging of 'woman' in the visual field of pornography and the legal field of censorship became the site of divisive positioning. The virgin/whore dichotomy escalated the tensions of the debate. There were many skirmishes, guerrilla attacks, unholy alliances. The feminists who had initiated the fight against pornography in the 1970s to defuse the very real violence against women which dominant culture ignored or denied, found their struggles co-opted by a moral majority who stepped over battered bodies of women in their rush to manipulate public opinion. In the midst of this media inspired conflation between the effects of violence against women and a full scale call by the New Right for a return to censorship and family values, women came out of the closet to declare their enjoyment and their fantasies of the 'oppressive' structures of sado-masochism, butch/femme roles, and just plain representations of fucking. The voices of sex workers emerged in this fray, declaring their allegiance to objectification. Women of colour stood up and said wait a minute, these debates have nothing to do with our sexuality. *Off Our Backs* recorded the debates and theoretical discussions around censorship and pornography within American feminism. *On Our Backs* appeared as a lesbian porn magazine. In an epilogue accompanying the publication of the papers of the Banard Conference on Sexuality in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984) Carol Vance described a pitched battle which ensued over the issue of sado-masochistic representation. Panic and recriminations ensued as women whose struggles were rooted in the experiences of battered women confronted participants who were attending the conference to discuss their enjoyment of such violence within a framework of sexual pleasure. A confrontation over 'perversion' had emerged and admission to the sisterhood of feminism was being denied.

In Canada, these same confrontations appeared in the pages of *Broadside*, *Fireweed*, *Fuse* and the *Body Politic*. Susan Cole of *Broadside* took up a pro-censorship position around the issue of violence against women, fighting the New Right on one hand and the Positive-Sex lesbian S/M movement of the *Body Politic* on the other. Varda Burstyn published *Women Against Censorship* (1985), broadening the debate from an issue of feminism to an issue of state censorship. OFAVAS's challenge to the Ontario Censor Board, begun in 1982, had broadened to a massive protest by visual artists in Ontario, culminating in the organization of *Six Days of Resistance Against the Censor Board* in 1985 and the accompanying exhibition and catalogue, *Issues of Censorship*, produced by A-Space in Toronto. The tensions which threatened to tear apart a concept of 'feminist' sexuality had been accelerated into a public platform where feminism, state censorship, self-censorship, pornography, artistic freedom, gay liberation became entangled in a very complex and often acrimonious debate. The exploration of female sexuality became a site of contention that had festered and split open into a division of simplified absolutes. The contextual middle between anti-pornographers and sexual libertarians, between pro-censorship and anti-censorship forces, appeared to be swallowed by the fervour and heat of emotions. And although these emotional and highly public fights seemed

remote in their recriminations from the cool detachment and theoretical rigour with which sexuality was discussed in psychoanalytic theory, they had one thing in common. For whether one was discussing cinema as a fetishistic structure or proclaiming the rights of SM advocates; decrying censorship as an instrument of sexual repression or the protective mechanism against patriarchal violence; the boundaries of a female sexuality and representation appeared to be morality on one hand and perversion on the other.

A certain irony seems implicit here. A contradiction ensues. Perversion and morality seem odd bedfellows to frame the parameters of a feminist debate. Morality, emerging from the bowels of a church/state alliance, declares sexuality a hierarchical riddle of the Sphinx which begins with God, locates white man in middle, and ends with the Law. Perversions, although Oedipal in imagination, are 20th century versions of sins, acted out against women and a natural order. While psychoanalysis bases its descriptions upon a clinical practice which claims neutrality in its construction of a listening site of transference, its work, through a symptomatology of aberrations, presupposes a heterosexual orientation. And in working backwards from speech to its manifestations, from the unconscious to ego idealization, the institution of psychoanalysis determines a vast system of classification where cultural practices, contexts, and moralities are flattened into a biologicistic sphere. Perversions are not simply clinical fixations resulting from arrested development, but sexual aberrations held up to the scrutiny of state regulation and the public barometer of moral swings.

Given the implicit moralism with which the regulatory system of sexuality is imbued, it is not surprising that the feminist anti-porn movement suddenly bared its teeth from behind a loving monolith exterior when voyeurism, exhibitionism, fetishism, sado-masochism, and homosexuality, to name a few of the more common 'perversions,' became entangled with the theory and practice of a female sexuality in 1980s North America. But what is surprising, in this explosion of difference and insistence upon women's desire in traditionally male spheres of pleasure, is its lack of incorporation within feminist film theory. Writers such as Mary Ann Doane continue to discuss the problem of female spectatorship as a homogeneous paradigm of the male gaze versus women's narcissism and objectification (most recently, Doane cites a litany of 1940s films to illustrate female specularization). Teresea De Lauretis, at a Semiotics Conference in Toronto of June, 1987, took up spectatorship as a constructivist position, locating in the filmmaker's intentions the possibility of creating women-identified and lesbian desire through cinematic imaging. While emphasizing differences between women rather than sexual difference between men and women, she does not extrapolate from these differences a possibility of a female pleasure in male-identified structures or patriarchal representations. Rather, she turns away psychoanalytic theory towards an ideological analysis in which she lists such diverse works as *Jeanne Dielmann*, *Jeanne Dielmann* and *Born in Flames* as feminist films which are laudatory in their deliberate attempts to construct a cinema for a female spectator. The relation of women's representation in classical cinema to issues of spectatorship is not cross-examined, but an alternative representation is proposed where the manipulation of narrative form and content circumvents the male gaze.

De Lauretis' shift from psychoanalytic and semiotic paradigms in *Alice Doesn't* (1984) to an examination of differences within the female spectator constructed by cinematic intention, alters the discourse of spectatorship but not its assumptions. For cinema remains the desiring machine, con-

structuring an over-determined relation of the spectator to his/her object of representation. Women's bodies in dominant cinema are frozen poses, surface repetitions of Freud's case studies on hysteria which have become transfixed sites of observation. Spectators do not project their desires, neuroses, perversions, sexuality, but are projected upon: silent participants in a massive psychic infrastructure that can be chipped away at but not dismantled. The pleasure in looking remains entrenched in a voyeur/exhibitionist binary which presupposes the merging of technological mastery with patriarchal ideology. Feminist film theory, emerging from an institutionalized site of listening in psychoanalysis, reflects an alignment with this conflation of society's moral standards and heterosexual norms. As the grid of technology, ideology, and morality becomes dispersed through a multivalent array of sexual practices, film theory remains ensconced in a paradigm that resists women's active participation in the pleasure of perversion. Like psychoanalysis, theory resists the patient's shifting discourse, conflates the symptoms with the cure, mistakes the representation for the object of desire. And nowhere is the gap between theory and desire, between representation and objectification, more evident than in Mulvey and Doane's strange elision of homosexuality as another imaginary register in the construction of looking and pleasure in dominant cinema's structure.

Inversion, or homosexuality, is the most glaring example of a 20th century push towards a conflation of 'scientific' assessment with an unacknowledged moralism. Yet it has been virtually ignored as a theoretical construct with which to critique the heterosexism of the cinematic apparatus. Sodomy, once a sin against nature and god which could be perpetuated by anyone's illicit desires, suddenly became not a transgression, but a disease. Same-sex object-choice became a manifest symptomology, and hormonal studies were launched to assign biological characteristics to those afflicted. There was, in this scientific model, no female sexuality, as (homo)sexuality in women was marked by a 'masculinity complex' in which the illness was characterized by a male attitude towards a feminine object-choice. Perversion, within these descriptions, seemed to have much less to do with the scientific frontiers of empirical investigation than a massive transference of a biblical morality. With the gay rights movements gaining momentum in the early 1970s, a tremendous struggle was launched to remove homosexuality from the roster of psychiatric disorders. The scientific establishment backed off, and homosexuality officially became an orientation rather than a disease. Intertwined with this change in status from perversion to preference were the lesbian debates within feminism where women's desire for women became the register of a female specificity rather than a clinically designated homosexual practice of inversion.

The consequences of this lobbied effort to re-define the parameters of sexual orientation were potentially immense. Homosexuality as a practice rather than a perversion called into question the heterosexism of the psychoanalytic canon which projected an ideal object of the opposite sex. As same-sex identification, homosexuality challenged binary relations and a male gaze which presupposed a pleasure of looking predicated on women's position within representation. Conversely, the proclamation of a female sexuality made way for the possibility that voyeurism and exhibitionism were no longer a masculine domain but a relation which expressed women's desire to be looked at and to look at each other. In short, to construct with a vengeance an objectification which gave each other pleasure. Moreover, the acceptance of homosexuality stripped heterosexuality of its implicit virgin/whore, voyeur/nice guy dichotomies. If women displayed

excess femininity perhaps it was not masquerade they were constructing but a simple and direct access to pleasure through exhibitionism. The *femme fatale* of dominant cinema and the Porn Queen of the video underworld may have been predicated upon a heterosexist construction of the gaze, but the identification process of the spectator could no longer be assured. For sitting in the darkened theatre were a number of possible reactions to the surface objectification of women's bodies, from the female voyeur to the disinterested male. Naive liberation theories aside, speculation, if not representation, of diverse sexual practices seemed possible. If one perversion had been cast aside, perhaps others would follow. Sexuality would no longer be the object of rigid conformation and representation its policeman, but a dispersal of desire across a complex register of the imaginary leading to a conceptualization of difference outside of strict gender categories.

Psycho-analytic film theory's fascination with deviation, however, does not extend past a structural paradigm of sexual difference into this realm of sexual diversification. The reasons for this resistance to a multivalent imaginary of desire and perversion are complex. For although the elision of homosexuality is the most telling sign of Mulvey and Doane's conformity with an unstated morality, this points to a more veiled confusion of condensation and displacement. The object of desire that became the object of scrutiny through feminism's critical eye, was neither woman, nor her image, but cinema itself. The exposition of sexual difference as a binary relation, where women took up a surface illusion to mask the male spectator's fear of castration, had less to do with a representational grid than a Freudian insistence upon fetishism as an exclusively male perversion. Yet with the recent developments in exploration, experimentation, and theoretical speculation of a female specificity in sexuality, insistence upon a male paradigm of fetishism becomes as hard to swallow as the psychoanalytic doctrine of lesbianism as biological inversion. Even if one accepts a Freudian model of fetishism as disavowal at the Oedipal moment of castration, rather than a more generalized notion of a fixation which privileges one source of sexual pleasures over a diffused grid of desire and satisfaction, fetishism straddles the terrain of feminine desires.

When Luce Irigaray writes of *When Our Lips Speak Together* (1977), in her reply to Lacan's elaboration of sexual difference, her insistence upon the primacy of touch over sight in the construction of female sexuality can be interpreted in a number of ways. But whether one dismisses the text as a disavowal of the little girl's realization of her lack, and hence lack of castration, or embraces it as a theoretical paradigm of feminine specificity, the fetishized pleasure in her notion of women's sensual relation to touch is visibly prominent. Yet Mary-Ann Doane, in her construction of femininity as masquerade, ignores the auto-erotic and lesbian connotations of Irigaray's text, and wraps herself into a Gordian knot to explain this proximity of the body and desire as an impossibility of fetishism rather than its enactment. Woman as victim, woman as masquerade, sexual representation as the tangible barometer of patriarchy's oppression: these themes persist despite the growing chorus of voices claiming a diversity within female sexuality that would encompass exhibitionism, voyeurism, sado-masochism and narcissism in both its heterosexual and lesbian orientations. And in the persistence of these themes, with their virulent opposition to those who would speak of female sexuality from within the enemy camp of representation, another kind of fetish emerges. For in psychoanalysis' magnificent obsession with the male gaze and in the anti-pornography coalition



Delphine Seyrig in **Jeanne Dielman** (1975).

tion's outrage, the object of scrutiny has become an object of misrecognition.

Cinema as a projection of pleasure, as a technology of the imaginary, has been disavowed. Its mechanisms of illusionistic representation have been laid over an ideological grid where men's control over the means of production is equated with their control of women's sexuality. Technology's capacity to infinitely repeat narrative structures has been conflated with a moralistic heterosexuality. Gender-role construction and psychoanalysis' institutionalized site of listening are flattened into a specularization of oppression. Female sexuality is displaced from the speaking body to a homogeneous object. Images of women become a monolithic condensation of identification and representation. Visual pleasure in narrative cinema has become a fetishization of a fetish. For it is the cinematic apparatus, the technology of the imaginary rather than its narrative mechanisms, which constructs a 20th century fixation of pleasure that can only be satiated by the consumption of representation.

The relationship of a male gaze to female spectatorship, within this cinematic nexus of ideology and sexuality where the consumption of images produces a fetishized pleasure, becomes a red herring. While women have become an object of commodification within the late-modernist economy of merchandising, they are a lure, rather than a site of disavowal within representation. It is the sheer repetition and mass reproduction of dominant narratives that produces a fixation in the pleasure of looking. The construction of sexual difference in narrative cinema reinforces a heterosexual status-quo and an economic ideology of objectification, but it does not determine an overriding relationship to sexual pleasure. For at the root of visual pleasure in the post-modern era lies the fetishistic structure of the technological imaginary. Thus in the feminist film theory of Mulvey and Doane, the transference of a cinematic fetishism onto the narrative imaging of woman led to a theoretical impasse. In confusing the ideological object of commodification with the psychic object of fetishization in the representation of women, their critique of narrative cinema only served to reinforce a heterosexism that denies women the self-determination to frame their sexual politics and sexual pleasure within dominant culture.

De Lauretis, recognizing the trap of a universalized sexual difference predicated upon an exclusively male pleasure in the gaze, retains the notion of gendered spectatorship but seeks to illuminate differences within female spectatorship through a valorization of a 'feminist' cinema. In continuing to privilege the construction of desire through the narrative

structure of cinematic codes, however, she negates the very differences she wishes to liberate from an over-determination of the spectator at a structural level. Her insistent location of female pleasure in alternative film practices, does not confront the issue of women's erotic desire produced through dominant cinema's imaging of sexuality. And in her vision of a 'feminist' cinema, her analysis of films begins to trip up against the fetishistic structures she evades.

Describing *Jeanne Dielman*, *Jeanne Dielman* as a film which addressed female spectatorship through its durational focus upon housework, De Lauretis constructs an imaginary spectator that conflates gender roles with their literal transcription within representation. Ackerman's film is in no sense that transparent. On the contrary, its static camera and durational structure function to underline a fetishism of the cinema which reveals all spectators as voyeurs. The deliberately constrained and repetitive actions of Ackerman's character, Jeanne Dielman, construct a visual nexus of neurotic obsession rather than the gendered images of a housewife. And as the spectator painfully watches Dielman's slow deterioration from a rigid pattern of repetition to small but fantastically unnerving aberrations in routine, the sensation is one of repulsion rather than identification. Similar in effect to Ackerman's lesbian sex scene in *Je Tu Il Elle*, the cinema in *Jeanne Dielman*, *Jeanne Dielman* is de-eroticized. The repetition and duration of movement combines with the disinterested eye of a static camera to reveal the gaze, not as a mechanism of commodification, but of consumption. Denied the narrative structures which displace this pleasure of consumption upon a grid of sexual difference, an incredible cinematic tension ensues. The spectator's construction in a fetishism of illusion, the pleasure fixated upon spatial and narrative movement within the frame, is rent open, refused a place. The technological imaginary and the imaginary register of desire are laid open as two separate constructions. The conflation of these imaginaries to produce satisfaction is revealed in the tension of Ackerman's cinema as a dual fetishization of the voyeur's consumption displaced onto a grid of sexual difference.

Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, *Jeanne Dielman* is one of those rare masterpieces of the cinema that is able to simultaneously embody and critique the conflation of technology, ideology, fetishism, and representation that constitutes the complexity of the cinematic apparatus. And emerging from its deconstruction is the possibility to conceive another project, a project that would delineate a possibility of female pleasure within cinema's illusionistic mechanisms. Such a project did emerge, born of the debates which surrounded the issues of female sexuality and the issues of censorship in Toronto. Initiated by A-Space, a local artist-run and community orientated gallery, the project proposed the commissioning of non-filmmakers to produce explorations of women's eroticism in super-8 film. Exploring the parameters of sexual representation within the technological imaginary of fetish and consumption, this undertaking did not emerge from the rarified discourse of feminist film theory nor from the studied marginalization of the avant-garde, but rather from women whose definition of their sexuality had little to do with either the dominant cinema or a theoretical critique of representation. The resulting works of these non-filmmakers produced over several years and two workshops challenged both the heterosexism and the objectification women through the cinematic apparatus. Chris Berchell, working in collaboration with a group of women named The Positive Pornographers, produced an exhibitionist extravaganza called *Slumber Party*. In featuring women constructing an orgy designed for their own visual pleasure, *Slumber Party*



Lynne Fernie's *The (S) Word Swallowers*.

proposed a strategy where the fetishistic structure was appropriated to produce an explicitly female consumption of their own exhibitionism. Lynne Fernie, in her film *The (S) Word-Swallowers*, took an opposite tack, dealing with the language of lesbian eroticism by withholding the image as an invisible object of desire while a poetic text described the erotic detail and the erotic suppression of lesbian desire.

In a subsequent workshop held a year later, the parameters of erotic exploration were extended to include groups which encompassed race and class as well as sexual orientation. Lesbians of Colour collaborated to produce *Eroticolours*, in which sexuality was examined in relation to the body's colour and strength versus society's white bias imaging. Gwendolyn, a sex worker in Toronto's strip bars, produced a cinematic exploration of women's relationship to pleasure which challenged the feminist theories of sexual imaging that would view sex workers as oppressed, or somehow complicit in the objectification of women's bodies. In *Out of the Blue*, the Pleasure Girls, strippers in the sex trade, each constructed a scenario of their off-the-job sexual pleasure. One re-created an orgy similar to *Slumber-Party* but included the participation of men whose sensual and fluid relation to the women's sexual interplay negated a construction of a male gaze. Another girl made the fetishization of consumption in sexual pleasure extremely visceral in her erotic relation to paper bills of money which she caressed and impaled and crumpled in a focussed ecstasy. Strippers spoke of the pleasure in the preparation for stripping, in the pleasure of performing. A Pleasure Girl explored her erotic relationship to her cat, masturbating not for the camera, but for the sheer pleasure of the furry animal that accompanied her auto-erotic fantasies. In each scene of the film, pleasure was never predictable in its representation, nor did it in any way conform to a technological reproduction of the sexual imaginary. Each woman in the film was a desiring object, producing pleasure through images and actions diametrically opposed to a cultural status-quo of female sexuality.

While the description of these films is a cursory one, and does not represent the entire range of erotic language explored by all the participants, it does suggest that the representation of female pleasure is not an impossible dream, but an active production of desire and consumption. In turning to a site where it is speaking, breathing bodies that construct pleasure, the parameters of morality and perversion which have dominated the theorization of feminine desire fade into the blackened edges of the film frame. For it is in an insistence of our self-determination of sexual pleasure, seeking to illuminate possibilities rather than create boundaries, that the male gaze will be diffused. In solidarity with the Pleasure Girls, I will suggest that the way to female pleasure is in the creation of an alternative cinema that does not moralize the dominant constructions of sexuality but disperses our desire across a spectrum of images from the most exhibitionist to the most obscure. We must insist that our pleasure as female spectators is not that of the trans-sexual, squeezed into a dualistic option of sexual difference, but amorphous, shifting like a phantom, slippery like a serpent. Female eroticism, like the female anatomy, is not a linear projection into a world carved and moulded to receive ejaculatory ecstasy. It is more perverse, elusive, threatening in its diffuse forms that subtly challenge the towers of Babel built to soothe men's anxiety. And if we prepared to listen to the voices of 'perversion,' to celebrate rather than censor the outcasts from theoretical paradigms constructed in the academic salons of the first world and the fixed site of psychoanalysis, we will discover that female desire is not merely a visual representation, but a visionary flow of pleasure. □

The Wolf-Man, about 1910.



Howling at the Machine: A BED-TIME STORY

by David McIntosh

One Saturday morning I woke up with this tremendous hard on. I realised that the thing I was turned on to was an image of my father as a younger man. And the fantasy became stronger. I started to remember things that happened in the past. I remembered crawling into my father's bed, imagining him now to be asleep—and putting my hands into his shorts and feeling his cock. And I remember it being soft and getting hard. I don't remember his waking up or how long it lasted and I was excited and scared at the same time. While I was masturbating I was thinking of myself as a young child, eight or nine. And the orgasm I had while fantasizing giving my father a blow job was the most exciting I can ever remember having. I fell asleep for about an hour. Immediately I started having the same fantasy again. I found it easier to do the second time. Then I started to remember, or seemed to remember, an instant in my life where I remember my mouth being on my father's cock. I don't remember if it was hard or soft. I blocked it out quickly when it came. But it wasn't like the fantasies of masturbation. It was a visual memory.

ALBERT'S STORY¹

It's the night of July's only full moon and I've just finished re-reading this passage, thinking about the complexity of this man's experience—remembering, dreaming, anticipating, reconstructing, recapitulating, repeating, coming. The moon has just risen, orange, hung low in a humid sky. Fox Broadcasting is premiering its new summer series *Werewolf* tonight. Chuck Connors, starring as the head of the werewolf bloodline being hunted down by his latest initiate, feels this is just about his best role yet: "It's been lots of fun. It's fantasy that has some semblance of reality." There are many noisy scenes of the two opponents sniffing the wind for a scent of each other, shifting shape, and wrestling. The young man wakes up naked and a little less hairy, having lost all memory of what happened the night before. His prey has escaped and the hunt must continue. A simple repeatable plot (with variations) that can continue forever.

Earlier today, at 10:30 in the morning actually, the weekly animated cartoon version of *Teenwolf* had the Michael J. Fox character saving the reputation of his werewolf family (including Gramps who eats out of a dog bowl) from

misrepresentation by a greedy horror film producer who would stop at nothing to scare and terrorize audiences for a buck. After all, the 'Teenwolf' family is just like every other proud loving family, apart from the fact that they all howl at the moon and grow mats of hair everywhere.

Fathers, bloodlines, men roaming naked in woods, cartoons—where is all this coming from and why now? The wolfman is an ancient construction, and most documented evidence of his existence comes from the middle ages, at a time when farming was extending deeper and deeper into unknown forests, when the population was growing, when the Catholic church ruled bodies, imagination and commerce, when witches, warlocks, heretics and men who performed 'unnatural acts' (shape shifting and/or fucking each other) were tortured and burned at the stake. All of these notions were imported by Europeans to North America and were applied to native people here. Man shifting into wolf was a popular reality which could not be allowed to survive in the growing order of things (as opposed to vampire mythology which prospered by teaching proper deference to whimsical aristocrats). A constellation of inflections surrounds the idea of werewolf, but one of the most revealing is the equivalence of the ancient Greek words for 'lycanthrope' and 'sodomite.'

Is it totally unreadable then that the Chuck Connors werewolf 'pack' consists of young men with smooth faces and high butts who must be bitten to be initiated and wake up naked, exhausted and uncertain about what happened after a night of grunting and wrestling with the father of them all?

With the spread of scientific classification, statistical investigation and quantification during the 18th century, notions of reality and unreality—the co-existence of the two and movement between them through shifting and transformation—found new forms of expression: cinema and psychoanalysis, or, in the terms of reference of this investigation, 'the wolfman' and 'The Wolf-man.' Perhaps the first monster to appear on the screen was a wolfman in the 1913 picture *The Werewolf*. Many vampire movies came after that, but werewolves were not seen again until the 1930s in *The Werewolf of London*. Serge Pankejeff, born in Russia on Christmas eve 1886, started analysis

with Freud in 1910 (who named his client 'The Wolf-man' in his 1916 publication *From a History of Infantile Neurosis*) and continued analysis with the psychoanalytic institution until he died in 1979. Guy Endore (pseudonym for Harry Relis from New York), who was studying in Vienna at the time of publication of Freud's case study on the Wolf-man, went home to write the novel *The Werewolf of Paris* which was later adapted to a screenplay for *The Werewolf of London*. In 1986, Hugh Brody made a film called 1919 based on the Wolf-man's memoirs and the case history of Dora O. The intersection of cinema, Wolf-man and psychoanalysis is extensive, ongoing, has too many dates and is at times unbelievable, but it is most definitely deconstructable. And maybe the starting point is the one wolfman we know, the Wolf-man.

SCREEN MEMORY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DREAM

I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying in my bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window.) In front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. (I know it was winter when I had the dream and night-time.) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them . . . In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up.

THE WOLF-MAN²

A rich young Russian whom I have taken on because of compulsive falling in love, confessed to me after the first session, the following transference: he would like to use me from behind and then shit on my head. Of the wishes concerned in the formation of this dream, the most powerful must have been the wish for sexual satisfaction which he was at that time longing to obtain from his father.

SIGMUND FREUD³

I had found in Professor Freud a new father with whom I had an excellent relationship. He once even said that it would be good if all his pupils could grasp the nature of analysis as soundly as I.

THE WOLF-MAN⁴

Father-son relationships are almost inevitably saddled with the mythical-theoretical family romance embodied in

'Oedipus' and Freud's original lie by omission is found within his 'Oedipal' construction. The mythological version of this construction begins long before the birth of Oedipus, in fact it begins with his father, Laius, who seduced Chrysippus, the beautiful young son of Pelops, the king of a neighbouring city. The king complained, so the gods decided that Laius should be punished—but the punishment would only be carried out on his child, should he ever have one. Perhaps the gods thought that this was the best way to keep up Laius' interest in men and thereby avoid the whole problem. In any event, Freud has left this critical portion of the myth unspoken, theorizing instead a pre-Oedipal which accepts homosexuality but only in the pre-genital stage, in the very young child where these desires will never be acted on. The inherent homophobia of the analytical model is extended through Freud's notion that unsublimated homosexuality leads to neurosis, and that successful Oedipalization, including sublimation of homosexuality, is the basis of all social bonding and progress. Now what chance did the Wolf-man have when in his first session with Freud he expressed the desire to fuck him and then shit on his head?

Along with Dora O, the Wolf-man stands as a martyr to foregone sexual pleasure and as one of the earliest victims of the hopeless heterosexism and careerism of psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, we have to go through Freud to pierce the appropriated seductive power of his narrativized explanation of the life of the Wolfman. Freud approached the Wolf-man like a detective, structuring reality as a set of ambiguous signs, as a chain of events for which there is eventually a clear origin, intention and solution, only to find that this process could not explain the Wolf-man. And so, the 'invention' of the fictional narrative in the 'real,' the construction of a case-history which continues to refer to both reality and fiction while accepting neither, has been applauded as ushering in the form for expressing the 'Modern' condition.

He must manage to tell both 'at once' and 'in order', the story of a person, the story of an illness, the story of an investigation, the story of an explanation; and 'meaning' must ultimately lie in the effective interrelationship of all of these.⁵

Meaningful to just who exactly! Certainly not to the Wolf-man, whose 'Modern' condition consisted of life-long dependency on Freudian analysts. The power Freud retained as narrator

of the undecidability of the real, in conjunction with his Oedipal reproduction model, served him well as a transmission mechanism for his theories. The Wolf-man had to be convinced to transform his dreams of wolves into a representation of his parents having sex and then to identify with his father in that act. (Since then, the dream wolves have been reinterpreted as the leering faces of the adult men in the Wolf-man's family, as alterations of the portraits of Freud's five disciples which hung on the walls of his office, and as the white sheets that were wrapped around his parents as he watched them have sex as a one-year-old child.) Once this initial transmission was secured, the rest was a piece of cake.

The Wolf-man and his desires had been permanently immobilized, suspended in a Freudian fiction; his cure was to constitute his own absence. Only then was he allowed to speak, to write his memoirs to attest to that cure. However, the transformation of his desire prepared him only to produce a work which would fit into Freud's text. And so it grows. Meanwhile Freud was winning prizes for literature, and denying knowledge, self-knowledge, the power of speech, the possibility of pleasure in sexual acts, the pleasure of sex between men, the possibility of sensual or sexual contact between father and son. Freud set up an intersection between narrativization and structure of text which was designed to contain all critiques and which generated infinite regress, back to Oedipus and beyond, maintaining that the only possible relationship between a father and son was a murderous one.

SCREEN MONSTERS AND THE DREAM OF TRANSFORMATION

The child has terrible dreams and the professor suspects something of the truth.⁶

The transformation of the dream of wolves into the portrait of a child monster within, was accomplished by denying a memory of transformation to wolf. But "wolves have many ways of arriving at your hearthside. We try and try but sometimes we cannot keep them out."⁷ Film representations of the wolfman come and go in cycles, and reflect the highly codified lore of the werewolf with varying degrees of accuracy. In general, film is one of the few means of representing the imaginary, the dream in the style of material factuality (including the night room viewing filled with the full circle of projector light where we relive through a window); specific to the wolfman in film,

the dream of transformation has slowly been brought to the fore of inserting the history and reality of this monster into changing contexts, however, never transparently. Technology has also changed with respect to the representation of the transformation, the degree to which outward signs of excitement are portrayed. From 1941 to 1945, Universal and Columbia made six wolfman films between them, and most of them starred Lon Chaney. The explication of werewolfery in these works was minimal, with a much greater emphasis on grainy atmospherics and exotic settings.

All of the shapeshifters ended up wearing facial fur coats for their savaging, and there was usually some battle between an older and a younger wolfman in their excited hairy state over some plant that would cure them. The werewolves died at the end of each film, thanking their executioners for ending their lives. The second cycle, a series of cynical exploitation films, began in 1957 with *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* (boy going through puberty attacking screaming girls) and ended in 1973 with *The Werewolf of Washington*, in which a lycanthrope is responsible for the Watergate crimes.

The current cycle is the first to have approached the interrelationship of reality and unreality, with a historical knowledge of these monsters, as well as structurally engaging the representation of memory and dream. Alain Resnais' 1976 *Providence* is pivotal in the new series; it is the last film to portray shapeshifting as some synthetic hair stuck on with spirit gum and it is the first to engage the lore of the wolfman as well as the issues of the Wolf-man. Four members of a besotted old writer's family shift in his dreams and memories. His wife, son, daughter-in-law, and illegitimate son all change roles re-enacting what might or might not have happened earlier in the writer's life. Finally the bastard son, who no longer can be fit into a pattern or a reconstruction, shifts into a werewolf, asks to be killed, and is. *The Howling* was the first to apply modern prosthetics to the creation of a monster which grows a slimy protuberance, a pointy nose, a face with fangs; the object of this film is to poke fun at California ego psychology by creating an Essalen-style commune which turns out to be a community of werewolves trying to grow their own food who end up eating people anyway. *Wolfen* played the werewolf as an ancient tribe of native shapeshifters who ate garbage humans in rotted Bronx slums, and protected their environment

from the intrusions of megabuck developers. *An American Werewolf in London* was the first film to fully integrate information of the documented werewolf, especially the dream of transformation. The hero has been hospitalized after being bitten on an English moor. He dreams of running naked through the woods, stalking a deer and wolfing it down once he's caught it. The dreams get more and more nightmarish until they become real and he is the wolfman. In *The Company of Wolves* Angela Carter has painstakingly reconstructed all existing wolfman imagery and lore, and layered over it the narrative of 'Little Red Riding Hood' to portray a child's growing sexual desire—and the object of that desire, which as actualized, is the monster. The child just might be a monster too.

And wolves continue to multiply on screens, one bite ensuring membership in a pack of boys, the transmission of the screen dream which foretells of man becoming a wolf in order to have a physical, but finally murderous, contact with another man, replicating Freud.

RIGHT: Oliver Reed in **The Curse of the Werewolf**. BELOW: The transformation in the film **A Company of Wolves**.



THE WOLF-MAN'S BODY: SCREEN MONSTER MEETS SCREEN MEMORY

Freud knew nothing about wolves or anuses.⁸

The Wolf-man was an avid movie-goer. He actually wrote a film script, based on the Decembrist uprising against the czar, which he interpreted as an uprising of Russian princes of Norman origin against a czar of German origin. The script commemorated another event which occurred on the same day, December 14, when his father demanded that he separate from his friend Viktor (the homosexual Viktor who was punished for wanting 'to start something with a boy' at the central baths?).⁹ He tore up this script in frustration.

The Wolf-man may have died not having spoken, but he did have a body, and there are more than enough indications as to how he used it. So let's give this story a body, and let's start by giving it an anus.

The Wolf-man had a fairly developed attitude towards assholes. As we've already seen, he thought he would like to put his cock in Freud's and experience pleasure, and use his own to experience another pleasure. At another point in his analysis, he indicated that what he really wanted was for his father to fuck him and then be beaten on his genitals. But his most extensive anal practice involved ritual enemas. In fact, the major function of one of the two male companions he travelled with was to perform these enemas on him; this was not a solitary erotic practice, but one shared with another man.

In giving him an anus, we find we've also given him a penis. Let's send him to the tailor for a new pair of pants, made to measure. After the enemas, this was his biggest sexual thrill with other men, having someone root around in his pants, adjusting his balls, moving them from side to side, while he watched in the mirror, nodding approval of the new pants or not. In addition to what he can already do with his penis in relation to anuses, he can now also urinate. And he can strip off all his clothes, piss around them in a circle, and wander safely in a state of excitement and enchantment. Let's send him out to play, in the park, in the woods.

Now let's give him a nose. It grows larger, with unexplainable zits, warts for suckling demons. It is grotesque and beyond scientific repair. But it is really the dangerous teeth under his nose which are making him suffer, so he has them pulled out (they will fall out any-

way because his jaw juts out) and replaces them with two sets of false ones, which can be popped in or out, depending on the occasion at hand.

We've done quite well with this body, so why don't we give him another one. He demands that he be born on Christmas day—along with every other werewolf. His other body will have no tail, not because it doesn't have a penis, but because a demon can not create anything new, just rearrange what exists—so he will be an imperfect animal, with no tail. Aesthetically speaking, when you're on all fours, covered with hair, slaving and howling, a gobbling predator, a tail might very well interrupt passion, covering that part of the body which most demands attention. And he will be able to change bodies, he can shift from grotesque to unnoticeable at will. And let him time shift too. With two bodies he can be a child and an adult simultaneously.

And let's have the body work, produce things. He can paint, be an artist, sort of. Psychoanalysts the world over pay dearly for a trophy, a full colour oil of the original dream. A nice landscape, or even a photo of the Wolf-man won't do. No, it must be as close as possible to having the head of a werewolf mounted on the wall. And since werewolves revert back to human form when they die, the image of the dream of wolves must stand in. This is how he will pay his bills in his old age.

Now we need some other wolves. There is never just one wolf, there is always a pack. His favourites in the pack exist only in stories—John Huss, a heretic who was burned at the stake, all the movie monsters, everyone in the child's tale of the tailor and the seven wolves. But let's give him some livelier playmates—let's change the 'we' who have been orchestrating this make-over to 'wolves.' Don't worry, I'll go first, the 'we' can be me. It always has been. And I have always been the Wolf-man. The pack positions us, points out how we do or don't join in.

And finally, we want a new script. This time let's give us what we really want, including a father—and no murder. Here goes.

One night, a young boy went with his father to the forest to chop wood. The snow had drifted deep and the moon was blue and full. Deep in the bush, the boy heard the freezing howl of a wolf. He turned to huddle under his father's arm but found him gone. All that remained was a pile of his father's clothing and an enormous glaring naked man, pissing on the clothes,

causing a cloud of steam to swirl around them. The man was covered with hair, except for his nipples, hard and purple as fall berries. And when he crouched and turned his back to the boy, he could see that the man's genitals were swollen and shiny. A chorus of howls arose as the boy reached out to touch the monster.

"What big arms you have," said the boy, stroking the monster's shoulders.

"All the better to hold you with," replied the monster.

The boy got down on all fours between the man's arms and ran his tongue along the wolf's teeth. "What sharp teeth you have."

"All the better to eat you with."

And the wolf tore off the boy's clothes with his teeth, sniffing and licking, as the boy drew himself deeper into the wolf's fur by the fistful. Their bodies flew and their passion burned so that the snow drew aside leaving them to rest on a fragrant bed of pine needles and moist leaves. After that the boy slept contentedly every night in the arms of the gentle wolf. They grew together, prospered and lived (till they died). □

ENDNOTES

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3. Ibid, p. 506.
4. Muriel Gardiner, *The Wolf-man by The Wolf-man*, Basic Books, 1971, p. 89.
5. Peter Brooks, "Fictions of the Wolfman," in *Diacritics*, March 1979, pp. 76, 173-175.
6. Basil Copper, *The Werewolf in art and literature*, St Martins Press, 1977, p. 223.
7. Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves," in *The Bloody Chamber*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1979, p. 111.
8. Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, in *Semiotext(e)* 2:3, 1977, p. 137.
9. Karin Obholzer, *The Wolf-man, Conversations with Freud's Patient—Sixty Years Later*, p. 130.

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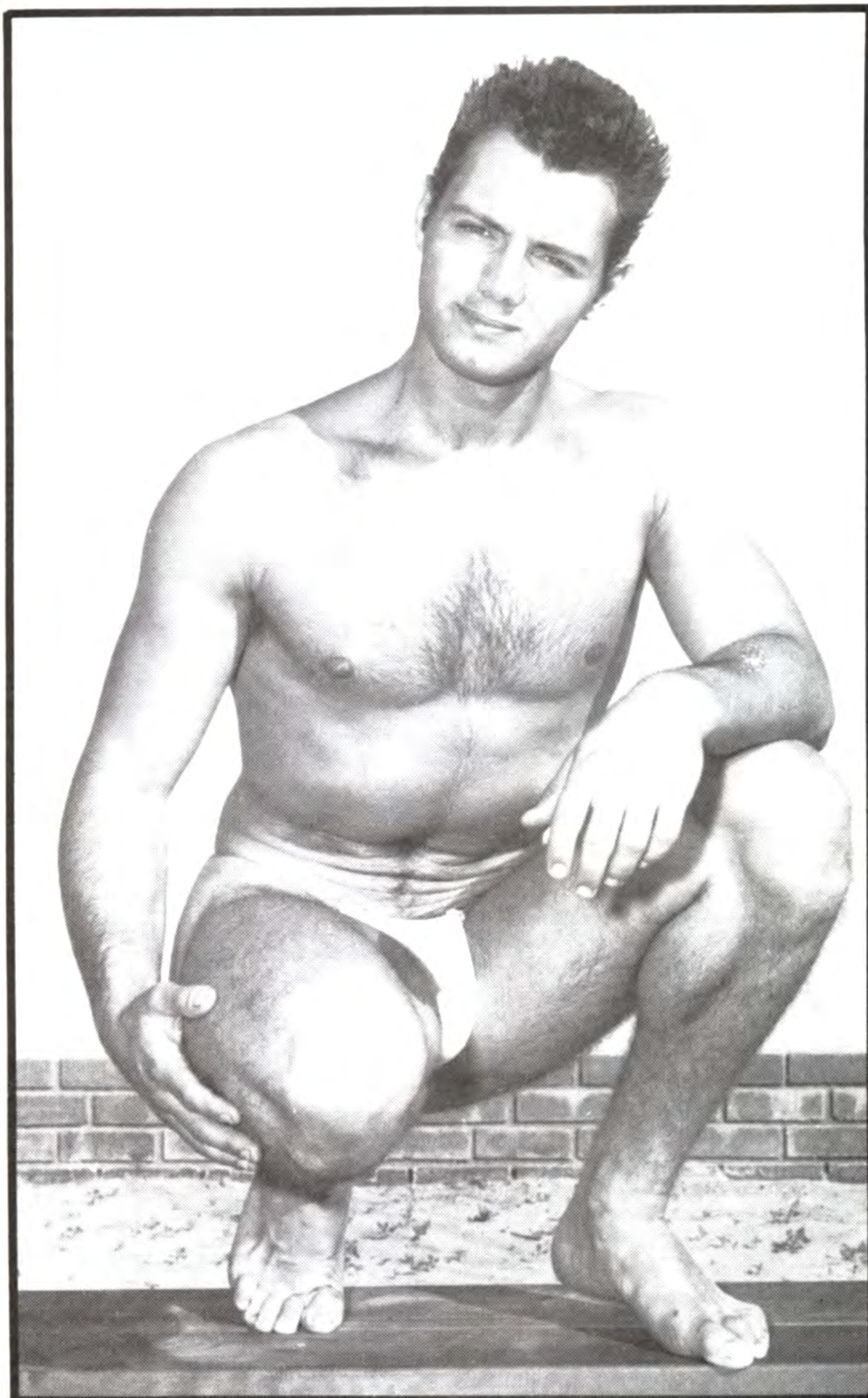
Hard to Imagine:

GAY EROTIC CINEMA IN THE POSTWAR ERA

by Thomas Waugh

IN PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS on gay male eroticism between World War II and Stonewall, I focused on several distinct bodies of work, chiefly North American, constituting a visualization of our desire as it evolved during this key historical period. (Waugh, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986) I analyzed a scattered tradition of illicit cinema and photography, produced on both an amateur and an artisanal basis and circulated underground. I also examined licit 'physique' photography, by far our most visible cultural expression during this period. Circulated above-ground, physique photography reached far beyond the borders of the embryonic postwar gay ghettos through small magazines and mail-order merchandising.

In deciphering the impact of various socio-economic, technological and cultural factors, I focused on the transfer of the socio-psychological dynamics of both individual closet and collective ghetto onto this licit inscription of sexual desire. Its interface with the burgeoning gay marketplace and with the neophyte gay civil rights movement also enters the analysis. Other conjunctural historical forces as well were considered, namely the apparatus of state terror and censorship. The imprint of this apparatus is most measurable on the licit stratum of physique photography, but it has also determined the basic dialectic of licit and illicit itself. Finally, I dissected the constructions of the images: their internal encoding of relations of power, their cultural dynamics arising from the visual play of nudity and costume, their signs, displacements and surrogates of sexual exchange, their strategies of cultural resistance and survival, and their sometimes inadvertent documentation of our personal and collective histories.



The "posing genre": the stress of the look. Bruce of Los Angeles, c. 1960. Model unknown. TW Collection.

In this paper I would like to examine "physique cinema," a unique and somewhat arcane body of work confined historically within the same period and merchandised, like physique photography, through a licit mail-order network, though on a somewhat smaller scale. Physique cinema has been hitherto largely unknown to the post-Stonewall generation of gay historians, but it is remembered fondly, if uncritically, by their elders. By isolating such a small corpus, we may be able to arrive at an even clearer sense of the cultural dynamic of gay eroticism in the transitional postwar period, a clearer sense of how homo-sexual representations intended for the commodification of arousal both reflect and shape socio-cultural factors.

Physique films, in comparison to still physique photographs, those frozen portraits of corporeal perfection, provide, with their dreamlike structures of narrative momentum and fulfilment, a rich document of our sexual *imaginaire* of the period. Narrative identification with an unfolding communal impulse replaced the alienating scopophilic fixation on the static spectacle. The gay man became enactor of desire within the narrative instead of external perpetrator of the look of desire. Narrative allowed the storytellers of our burgeoning subculture to transform the one-way voyeuristic attachment to the representation of the male body into a complex relationship of psychic, dramatic and political identification.

HISTORY, CAPITAL AND TECHNOLOGY

TO SPEAK OF MAIL-ORDER physique cinema as a 'small corpus' is to speak in relative terms. Small, certainly in comparison with the thousands of still photographs and small magazines inundating the postwar market throughout the industrialized countries (especially repressed Anglo-Saxon ones embarked on the cross-the-board commercialization of sex); a typical 1959 listing of physique studios numbered 63, most American, but also representing Canada, Brazil, England, France, Sweden, South Africa, and Belgium, while a 1964 gay merchandise catalogue could list 266 male physique photo and art sources. (*Trim* [Washington], No. 13 [Aug. 1959], p.44; *Vagabond* 64, Directory Services Incorporated [Minneapolis], advertisement for *DSI's Directory* 84)

In contrast, the more restricted market for mail-order films included at most only a dozen producers, predominantly American. Furthermore, the film market developed somewhat later than the photo and magazine networks. It is true that prototypes of the films are extant from as early as the late '30s, presumably hobby-scale productions for personal use. (Waugh, 1983; Kinsey) The earliest commercial example the author is aware of dates from 1949: an interesting narrative from pioneer Richard Fontaine called *The Cyclist*. (Fontaine, whose real name is Richard Dusbabek, is a recurring participant in this history. Over the years his film companies have included Apollo Productions, Zenith Productions and R.A. Enterprises.) Another Fontaine film, *Cocktails*, discussed below, is dated tentatively for the following year. A Cincinnati outfit called Spectrum Films is visible as early as 1953 and within two years a prominent advertiser of posing and narrative films in the physique magazines. A fairly sophisticated narrative called *Greek Gods* was produced by Bob del Montague in Detroit in 1954 and is still extant (Kinsey).

The boom in the physique cinema market didn't come, however, until 1958-59, when Bob Mizer of the Athletic Model Guild, the Hollywood studio already famous since 1945 for its flourishing photo and magazine business entered the fray with an assembly-line output which was to continue weekly for more than a decade. (The *AMG* magazine is entitled *Physique Pictorial*. For a survey of nearly 40 years of *AMG* still photography see Leyland, 1982) Mizer, by far the major film producer in the whole network, claimed at one point to have produced 1,500 films. (Siebenand, 1975, p. 43) But it is possible that the entire corpus by all producers amounts to little more than that number (fewer still if one is referring to extant works). The French studio, headed by Jean Ferrero in Nice, also added film production, principally solo posing films, to its catalogue around the same time as Mizer (Quebec). By the early '60s, they had been joined by Bruce of Los Angeles, Pacific Films (Albany, Cal.), DSI (Minneapolis), Bob Anthony (New York), Kris Studios (Chicago) as well as London's Graham Studio and Munich's Hollfelder Studio. The author has studied about 50 films, representing five or so producers and most of the various genres in play.

Technically speaking, the physique film corpus has the kind of self-enclosed

historical autonomy common to several other short-lived artforms arising from erratic technological proliferation. Although many of the mail-order films were produced originally in 16mm, certainly by the major producers, the vast majority were released in the much cheaper medium of regular 8mm (although they were also available in 16mm at a higher price). The 8mm format was popularized in the early '50s as a mass marketed amateur technology just in time for the boom in licit gay eroticism in the physique milieu.

Many consumers even did without projectors, occupying both hands during screenings with hand-cranked portable viewers obligingly sold by the physique studios. At a time when the embryonic gay movement was preaching the privacy of the domestic space, the significance of a leisure technology, with its requirement of individuated, private and domestic consumption, cannot be underestimated. Similarly, the advent of the capital-intensive hardcore boom at the end of the '60s, privileging the theatrical 35mm format at the time of the political assertion of our right to public space, was no less symbolically apt.

Stonewall was thus the symbolic chronological curtain to our age of privatized cinematic arousal as much as it was the symbolic inauguration of the era of both gay liberation and theatrical hardcore. The switchover from the 8mm spindles in the porno houses constituted this fundamental rupture, but at the same time entrenched a crucial continuity in a gay *imaginaire* that had already been maturing for a generation or two. Mail order erotic cinema sputtered on through the '70s, now in the even more accessible medium of Super 8, but in a marginal role overwhelmed by the theatrical market. Both film formats finally faded, and 8mm completely disappeared, with the appearance of the home VCR around 1980. The return to privatized audio-visual eroticism in the '80s represents a fascinating development worthy of further study.

The three principal genres within the physique cinema corpus will now be discussed in terms of internal iconographic dynamics and contextual ramifications: the posing film, the wrestling film, and the narrative film. If this discussion seems overly speculative, it is because gay cultural history is still in a pioneering phase as pertains to this key period, the social and political historiography having been undertaken far in advance of—and sometimes at the expense of—its cultural analogue.

THE POSING FILM

THE POSING FILM WAS THE most naked, frontal enactment of the sexual pleasure of looking at the male body, the most unquestioning assumption of our socialization as males, gay or straight, within a culture that privileges the male sexual regard. It was also a denial of all of this, the most explicit embodiment of the physique alibi. It disavowed the cult of homoerotic desire through the profession of a cult in some ways every bit as marginal, the cult of the hyperdeveloped muscle. It was predicated on the masking of the phallus not only by the posing strap but also by the bicep, the doctrine of "Look but don't touch."

In the posing films, the static quality of a succession of stiff physique poses, frozen in a moving medium, seemed to exaggerate all the more the pretense and artificiality of the mask. Undiluted by narrative fantasy or the proto-narrative momentum of combat (mediations cultivated in the other two genres), the posing films often foregrounded the awkward looks of the models at the invisible director, and by extension at the invisible spectator, as if asking for directions or mistrusting the motive. Or else the avoidance of looking, as if in discomfort at being the object of the look that dares not speak its name, amplifies the usual feeling of self-consciousness and unease. The presentational, frontal quality of the poses constantly accentuates the spectatorial status of the consumer. The posing film, refusing the spectator all entry into the frame through fantasy or identification, at the same time relegates the model's proud exhibition of his strength to a commodified sexual display.

Juwa La Vonce an AMG film from the early '60s, apparently released as late as 1968, is typical. (TW) The systematic elaboration of each muscle proceeds in sequence, including that special undeveloped organ, the model's not especially cinematic face in closeup, and his fetishized tattoo, that signifier of class and gender affinity as well as other cultural variables. A variation halfway through the film, a jump-cut change of costume from strap into see-through briefs, does not alleviate the embarrassment of a performer uncertain of the quality, nature, terms and destination of his performance. The display is concluded by an awkward exit stage left, as if both performer and *metteur-en-scène* had forgotten the cinematic format of the performance in their relief at the termination of the look.



The "posing genre": the stress of the look. Anonymous, late '50s. Posing still photo of unknown model. TW Collection.

There is also the stress of otherness. The consumer has his unbelonging, his marginality, thrown back at him from the screen, as observer whose participation in the rituals of the patriarchy is denied. He is the covert gay unrequited onlooker gazing from the outside at the implied bearer of heterosexual power, the unresponsive object of desire. The social role of the undeclared gay onlooker within the institutions of heterosexual male bonding is replicated.

Some films resort to often ingenious strategies for resolving these stresses of the look. *Cocktails*, a 4½-minute short by Dick Fontaine (1950), one of the earliest films in the corpus, offers an ingenious strategy for accommodating and rechanneling these stresses into humour and narrative. (*Laigla*) The invisible photographer becomes a persona in the

film, engaged in flirtatious repartee thanks to coy silent intertitles as full of wit and double-entendre as the title itself. The posing session becomes a short seduction narrative, a game of power and complicity between model and voyeur, beginning with classic disrobing and ending with postponed but anticipated gratification. It is unlikely that *Cocktails* was successfully circulated: certainly the distribution network was not yet in place and few later examples profited from its graceful and funny inventiveness.

An interesting contrast is *Ray Walling*, one of the earlier frontal nude posing films, distributed in 1966 by DSI with an editorial proclaiming the social validity of nudism. (TW) This film is considerably less graceful than *Cocktails*, encumbered both by the weight of

formula and by a necessary adjustment to the new aesthetic and structural demands of the phallus unbound. The addition for example of exercises such as handstands to the traditional repertory was part of an aesthetic detour, a perhaps misguided effort to adapt the motion picture medium to the flaccid penis in motion, spawning the short-lived sub-genre of the "danglie." With nowhere else to go, the film stumbles clumsily into narrative closure through the model's improvisation of a feigned yawn and make-believe sleep, offering through closed eyelids a less stressful scopophilic activity to the spectator.

More successful on their own terms in the "danglie" interlude are short solo loops by Bruce of Los Angeles. One featuring model John Manning employs costume and dramatic references to mine the infinite riches of popular culture, camp and fantasy. (TW) Dressed as a Native warrior complete with feather headdress, tomahawk and the natural setting of a rocky promontory, the model awkwardly performs several scouting gestures and dangle-inducing war-dances. This time, however, the stress is channeled towards a heightening of the same kind of self-reflexive complicity as in *Cocktails*. What is effectuated is a minority appropriation of the unspoken homoeroticism in majority mythology (cowboys and Indians) hilariously sending up its theatrical artifice, hypocrisy and prurience at the same time. The physique alibi is by this time only vestigial (though the fetish of pectoral size already seems to be mak-

ing its inevitable migration below the waist), perhaps another reason for the loop's agreeable durability.

The present corpus begins with the posing genre in the late '40s, the obvious cinematic extension of the already established still beefcake format. But it is not surprising that, due to the aesthetic and political problems I have emphasized, the posing film soon became eclipsed by the other two genres. By the time of an ambitious 1965 inventory of AMG productions, solo posing films occupied less than 10 percent of the almost 450 titles listed. (*Grecian Guild Studio Quarterly*, 1965)

THE WRESTLING FILM

AN OBVIOUS SPINOFF OF the posing genre, the wrestling film constitutes one of the more bizarre anomalies in our culture's history of resistance to censorship. This genre was the specialty primarily of AMG. Merchandised according to the names of the actors, many of whom acquired a kind of star status within the physique milieu, the films offered direct continuous representations of (usually) two figures wrestling over the 50- or 100-foot length of the film, usually mounted with a minimal variety of different angles and camera ranges. Mizer offered dozens of these films: of almost 750 titles in the *Grecian Guild* catalogue, about one-third are straight wrestling films. The listings occasionally tag the films according to surprisingly frank

estimations of the "quality" of the wrestling, whether it is particularly violent, posed, etc., e.g. "Phoney wrestling, but friendly action" (G-21). The tags often admit baldly to the pretense of the wrestling formula.

The voyeurism of the spectator reaches a certain apotheosis in the wrestling genre. The strap-clad athletes are forced into every possible positional permutation of vulnerability and accessibility. No doubt the special attraction is the coital simulacrum that is the basis of this sport. Is this in fact the attraction of mainstream wrestling as well? Does it play a part in all mainstream spectator sports of which Mizer's glistening romps are by extrapolation such a telling parody? The climactic narrative momentum of the wrestling loop, unlike with the serial and static posing film, culminates in exhaustion, depletion, and stasis, the sweating and oiled bodies literally collapsed on each other at the moment of orgasmic fulfilment.

Combat and sport, it goes without saying, are the only allowable formats of same-sex physical contact in Anglo-Saxon society. The enshrinement of wrestling as a licit crypto-erotic formula may be a sad commentary on our civilisation, yet it may also be a clue to the erotic function of violence and aggression not only in the present-day gay culture but across patriarchal culture as a whole, with its commercialization of spectatorship and its consecration of war. Many of the wrestling films gleefully deconstruct this mystification, admitting at the same time their game of encoding and compliance through blatant staging and simulation, through blatant zoom-constructed fragmentation of the erogenous body (especially as the '60s wore on), and through blatantly mock-coital poses in the promotional stills.

A celebration of the minority cultural practice of subtexting, the wrestling film is also a recklessly defiant declaration of the subtext's immunity from censorship and control. Wrestling became Mizer's trademark, the basic formula even of his narrative films, which had their wrestling interludes as predictably as Hollywood musicals would have their musical numbers. Many became indiscriminate frescoes of piled-up bodies and flailing limbs, an allegorical vision of mass riot transfixed the utopian dream of communal orgy. Does present-day gay male culture seem to privilege non-contact sports despite of or because of our traditional extreme awareness of the erotic potential of contact sports?



Wrestling as licit crypto-erotic formula. AMG, c. early '60s. Beefcake still photo, probably of Jim Stafford and Paul Blake, tied in to wrestling film. Leopardskin backdrop and plaster Grecian pillar are AMG trademarks. TW Collection.



Bruce of Los Angeles, 1964. Beefcake still of John Manning, taken in conjunction with two versions of posing film, one a "danglie" without strap, and the other with strap for mail-order distribution. TW Collection.



The "artist and model" formula. Anonymous c. late '50s. Beefcake still photo, possibly tied into narrative physique film. LAIGLA Collection.

THE NARRATIVE FILM

THE MOST DEVELOPED form of the mail-order cinema, the narrative film evolved within a decade from a minimally anecdotal variation of the posing and wrestling loops to full-length dramatic features aspiring to the theatrical market of the post-Stonewall period, arguably the first authentic dramatic film fiction of gay liberation. (In this latter regard, Fontaine is once again the key name as far as Los Angeles is concerned, not that his pious romantic melodramas of the immediate post-Stonewall period ever matched the grandeur of his aspirations. 4) Most of the early narrative films were thin contrivances for getting the models to disrobe, pose and fight. Our cultural heritage provided much fodder for such contrivances, however, which soon became as complicated as they were formulaic: innumerable bathing scenes, waking and sleeping scenes, "artist" plots in which the problems of sculptors

photographers and painters with their nude models invariably provided the hinge of the plot. Perhaps the most standardized were the pretexts provided by homosocial institutional settings (prisons, the armed forces, schools, sports). These usually provided combat stories in which a gay prototype would assert himself through a prolonged wrestling bout against a bullying authority figure, whether warden or officer or stepbrother.

A typical item of this category, *Boys In Prison*, a 7-minute film produced by AMG in 1959, presented a cast of about a dozen men in a surprisingly sophisticated outdoor set within the studio courtyard. The official synopsis was as follows:

The plot is of a young bodybuilder who is thrown into jail with a bunch of roughnecks. When he attempts to work out with his dumb-bells and cables they tease and ridicule him. The bully of the group tears his inspirational muscle-man pin-up photo from the wall and destroys it. When

the bodybuilder tries to fight the bully, the other prisoners restrain him (for his own good.) Then one day in the shower the final humiliation is visited upon the bodybuilder. After being forced to wash the bully's feet, the bodybuilder is given a kick in the rump which sends him sprawling. Fed-up, he tackles the bully, gets some wrestling holds on him which put him out of commission. The other prisoners are quite impressed. Back in the dormitory, the bodybuilder now gets the prized bunk, the other prisoners dutifully read the copies of *Physique Pictorial* which have been provided for them, and the film closes with them all going through their exercises. (*Physique Pictorial*, Spring 1959)

Of particular interest, other than the simple celebration of the men's bodies and the boy-next-door eroticization of jockey shorts, are several key mythological functions. The place of the novice and his eventual triumph over the bully would be an obvious allegory of gay self-affirmation even without the blatant labelling mechanism served by the "bodybuilding" affinity, the pin-up idol, and the reading material. This is not, however, the "coming out" formula of post-Stonewall fiction, but a utopian fantasy of an outcast's conversion of a whole social environment. (Compare similar readings that have been proposed for other covert gay cultural phenomena of the period, such as Dyer's interpretation of later-period Judy Garland films. Dyer, 1987. 5) The novice's courage and integrity, not to mention wrestling skill (rather than brute strength), transforms a fearful mob into a fraternal community. Group exercise becomes a sacrament of collective identity, consolidated by both looking (reading for both the spectator and the intra-diegetic characters) and doing (exercise, bathing, and mock-coital combat), the stand-ins for erotic exchange and the triggers of arousal.

The sado-masochistic character of this and many of the films is so prevalent that it requires further comment. Some of the AMG plots in particular are so brutal, even by today's standards, that one can assume that certain producers, probably Mizer, had a special predisposition to S-M fantasy. Yet that is not all. There is such overwhelming evidence of audience approval that one must deduce that the erotic discourses of violence, victimization and power not only effectively diverted the non-S-M constituency's erotic drives, stymied by censorship, but also tapped on a mythological level that constituency's experience of social oppression. How else to

account for a preponderance of victimization imagery in visual gay culture from St. Sebastian to AMG? Nevertheless the films do depart significantly in the final analysis from the S-M formula of the eroticization of power imbalances, overturning the terms of power, and staging the triumph of the victim. This fantasy of vindication is not so much an erotic fantasy proper, but a political fantasy of self-assertion. The internalization of oppression is transformed through the wish-fulfilment of the triumph-over-the-bully formula.

It is ironic that the gay artistic avant-garde of the period did not avail themselves of this political resource of wish-fulfilment, whether we are speaking of Tennessee Williams or Kenneth Anger. The latter's knuckles were soundly rapped by the Mattachine society for failing to rise above the internalization of societal hatred in *Fireworks*, a film that uses the structural contrivance of the erotic dream in the same way that fellow Angeleno Mizer employed wish-fulfilment myth. (Rolland, 1961) At that same time several hardcore uncirculated

amateur productions in 8mm from the same period, seen by the author, offer only minor discourses of victimization within their jubilant celebrations of sexual consummation and social difference.

One final aspect of the narrative films to be discussed elaborates issues already raised in relation to the posing and wrestling films, namely their minority appropriation of majority cultural goods and their deconstruction and subtexting of patriarchal mythology. For in addition to the mythologization of political wish-fulfilment and the documentation of our sexual and socio-cultural origins, the narrative films take these operations of appropriation, decon-exemplary richness of expression. What is at stake is of course an early and pristine articulation of the famous gay sensibility, quite aside from the films' primary operation of sexual arousal. This is not the place to belabour the many facets of this sensibility that have been proposed by authors such as Babuscio, Dyer and Bronski, but any of the narratives within the corpus at hand provide textbook compendia of camp taste, take uninhibited delight in excess,

parody, theatricality, and artifice, and, it might be said, offer much naive post-modern textual play before its time.

Take the particularly blatant example of AMG costume narrative (many of this toothsome subgenre were in fact shot by Fontaine), such as *The Captive*. Here, a Roman official interrogates a pair of captive comrades accused of spying, and finally frees them in tribute to their devotion to each other under torture: "Because of your bravery you have won your people's freedom, Go in peace!" Even such a minimal synopsis conveys the film's delighted indulgence in the appropriation and explosion of the Hollywood Biblical epic (together with an irreverent jab at the plaster pillars and "classical" iconography of the traditional physique alibi), complete with tunics ripped off oiled flesh at swordpoint, heroic gestures of parting held quite too long, and set design that is the ultimate in pastel vulgarity. Yet the film is not empty parody, rather a contradictory and somehow moving clash of an earnest almost pious text of wish-fulfilment with the high artifice and carnal intent of its vehicle.



AMG, early '60s. Beefcake still of Ken Cunningham and others from series tied to physique narrative **Sassy Seaman and the Officer**. TW Collection.

PUSHUPS AND THE KISS, or THE CONSTRUCTION OF DESIRE

AS MUCH AS PHYSIQUE films are indeed fantasy projections of an imaginary world, they occasionally offer reflections of the emerging subculture of the gay ghetto, with bikers, solitary artists, military drifters, bar habitués, bachelor apartments and roommates floating across the screen as shadowy refugees of the real world. The films absorbed a broader spectrum of cultural signals than the rigid alibis of the still photographs permitted—signals ranging from the (pop) cultural mainstream to inherited subcultural mysteries. They testify in encyclopedic detail to the emerging constituency that bred them, bought them, and got off to them, sketching the fabric of socially constructed forces that determined the dynamics of our ancestors' desire. This is as true in the pastoral escapist fantasies as in the "realist" anecdotes of ghetto life, as true in Mizer's never-ending campy embellishments of the posing/wrestling formulae as in Fontaine's earnest straining towards idealist discourses of self-affirmation. Both extremes of the repertory translate the impossibility of positive sexual space within patriarchal society, and at the same time unleash the possibility of jouissance, resistance and emancipation. The frisky, vibrant images of Mizer and the others engage the gay cultural historian in a sorting out of impulses of sexual essence from the disciplines of societal construction. They challenge us to untangle the ancient but invisible behavioural gestures of same-sex gratification from the elaborate over-determined web of cultural constraints, justifications and evasions masking and channeling them).

By 1967 or so, close to the end of our period, appeared *Cellmates*, a 15-minute dramatic short by Fontaine, who as we have seen had been among the very first of the physique producers almost two decades earlier. Here Fontaine was able to pack a very strong, all-but-explicit gay-positive love story and an astonishing and fervent male-to-male kiss within an anomalously tender novice-in-prison plot. Vestiges of the physique formulae, by this time unnecessary in the legal sense, were more than visible however, with sprightly nude push-ups functioning as an inevitable prelude to the kiss. The implication is unavoidable that generations of diversions, alibis and struggles

had left their indelible imprint on the conjecture of that historic kiss and were not about to evaporate in the harsh daylight of "liberation." □

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Abbreviations for Archival Sources of Films (noted in the text)

- Kinsey. The Archives of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and reproduction. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.
- Laigla Los Angeles International Gay and Lesbian Archives.
- Quebec Les archives gaies du Quebec. Montreal.
- TW Collection of the author.

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ABOVE: Orgy sequence in Ken Russell's **The Devils**. BACK COVER: Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman in **All That Heaven Allows**.

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